

THE WORDY RAM



LEA TASSIE

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by

Lea Tassie

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What an astonishing thing a book is. It's a flat object made from a tree with flexible parts on which are imprinted lots of funny dark squiggles. But one glance at it and you're inside the mind of another person, maybe somebody dead for thousands of years. Across the millennia, an author is speaking clearly and silently inside your head, directly to you. Writing is perhaps the greatest of human inventions, binding together people who never knew each other, citizens of distant epochs. Books break the shackles of time. A book is proof that humans are capable of working magic. (Carl Sagan)

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ANIMALS

Animals are multicellular, eukaryotic organisms in the biological kingdom *Animalia*. With few exceptions, animals consume organic material, breathe oxygen, have myocytes and are able to move, can reproduce sexually, and grow from a hollow sphere of cells, the blastula, during embryonic development. They have complex interactions with each other and their environments, forming intricate food webs. The scientific study of animals is known as zoology.

Well, if we're going to be formal, I guess that's a good definition of "animal." But when I hear the word "animal," I think of puppies and kittens and, perhaps, ladybugs. Then there are party animals, people with a particular interest in having a good time.

Wikipedia offers some statistics which I find fascinating:

Estimated animal species — 7.77 million, of which only 2.16 million have been described. Included are about 1.05 million insects, 85,000 molluscs, and 65,000 are vertebrates.

Size in length — From 0.00033 inch to 110 ft.

Groups of genes common to all living animals — 6,331. These may have arisen from a single common ancestor that lived 650 million years ago.

Let's take a closer look at those genes. The orangutan shares more than 97% of its DNA with humans. Close behind the orangutan are bottlenose dolphins, chimpanzees, African Grey parrots, pigs, and crows.

Cats weigh in at about 94%. So, if you ever wonder why cats and money control your life, now you know.

RAM

A ram is a male sheep. The word, as used for an animal, arose before the 12th century.

It may also be some type of battering ram, such as the plunger of a force pump or the weight that strikes the blow in a pile driver. In the computer world, it's random-access memory. Or it can be used as a verb, meaning to force something or attempt to destroy it. Synonyms for the verb include: bang, bump, collide, hit, knock, slam, and smash.

What interests me most are the words that begin with 'ram' and how these words echo the picture I have in my mind of an aggressive male sheep with big horns.

RAMBUNCTIOUS

This word means to be energetic, noisy, exuberant, boisterous, lacking in restraint or discipline. It's an alteration of 'rumbustious' (1777), meaning unruly or boisterous. Here's a quote from *The Boston Transcript*, Sept. 1, 1830: "If they are 'rumbunctious' at the prospect, they will be 'rip-roarious' when they get a taste."

Rip-roarious isn't recognized as a word, but I think it should be.

RAMPAGE

To rampage means to rush wildly about. The word is originally Scottish, probably an extension of 'ramp,' which means "to rage or storm about" (early Scots: "to rear up on the hind legs"). The first known use was in 1692.

RAMPANT

Rampant means to flourish or spread unchecked, extravagant, a menacing wildness, fierce, ravenous, erect, and upright. Synonyms include: uncontrolled, unrestrained, unbridled, widespread, out of control, rife, and spreading like wildfire. In heraldry, rampant means (of an animal) standing on one hind foot with its forefeet in the air. It is typically seen in profile, facing the left side, with right hind foot and tail raised. The first known use was in the 1300s.

If you're running rampant, you're on a rampage. Both come from the French word *ramper* meaning "to climb, creep" like an animal on hind legs, paws in climbing-mode, or like wild plants such as the kudzu. There can also be rampant wildfires that destroy houses or robots that run rampant in the lab after the janitor accidentally sets them free. Unruly children might run rampant at the supermarket, knocking cereal boxes off shelves, and thoroughly annoying the customers.

RAMP

This word (circa 1300) comes from the Old French *ramper* "to climb, scale, mount." Hence, of a person or a devil, "to attack, behave menacingly, as a lion or wolf would."

As a noun, the word means a sloping floor, walk, or roadway leading from one level to another, or a slope for launching boats. Much more peaceful than the verb!

RAMP UP

This verb phrase means to speed up or increase or expand, to bolster or

strengthen. It's used mostly in economics or business to mean an increase in volume, amount, or rate. "The company must ramp up production to meet the demand." But it's also used in non-business situations. "My headache is ramping up."

RAMSHACKLE

Ramshackle has nothing to do with rams, nor the act of being rammed, nor shackles. The word is an alteration of *ransacked*, an obsolete form of the verb to ransack, meaning "to search through or plunder." A home that has been ransacked has had its contents thrown into disarray, and that image may be what inspired people to start using ramshackle in the early 1800s to describe something that is poorly constructed or in a state of near collapse. Ramshackle in modern use can also be figurative, as in "a ramshackle excuse for the error."

'Ramshackle' didn't at first remind me of rams. But then I thought of what a house would look like if a ram got rambunctious in it.

SHEEP DIP/DEEP SHIT

The phrase "sheep dip" has several meanings.

1. a liquid mix of insecticide and fungicide used to protect sheep from infestations of external parasites such as itch mites, blowflies, ticks, and lice.
2. a protocol which is a normal first line of defense against viruses in high-security computing environments, as it prevents the spread of viruses brought by new devices.
3. to transfer military equipment or personnel to non-military ownership for the purpose of covert action. (US, espionage) Being sheep-dipped is being given an alternate identity. If you're in the military and about to be sheep dipped, it means your life is about to get a whole lot more interesting.
4. in business, it's a process by which employees are grouped together to be refreshed or re-invigorated by attending set training courses, more commonly known as "refresher" courses. In some companies, staff members may be "refreshed" once or twice a year, depending on the training.
5. Sheep Dip is the name of a Scotch whisky. The name arose from a time when amateur whisky distillers in Scotland's farmlands used to hide their hooch from tax collectors by labeling the barrels "Sheep Dip." This scotch is crafted by a master blender from 16 different Highland whiskies, aged from 8 to 21 years, and given a year to get to know each other in first-fill casks so

they mellow before bottling.

In brief, dipping a sheep gets rid of creepy crawlies. Dipping a person figuratively gets rid of details of his/her former life.

Now, switch the letters around a bit. Replace one 'p' with a 't' and you get "deep shit," which means in trouble; up shit creek or in a difficult situation. This is a spoonerism, a verbal error in which "a speaker accidentally (or accidentally on purpose) transposes the initial sounds or letters of two or more words, often to humorous effect."

And guess what? Deep Shit is also the name of a rock band.

EAGLE EYE

If you have an "eagle eye," you have unusually keen sight and keen intellectual vision. For example, "Antiques dealers have an eagle eye for valuable objects." The term was first recorded in the late 1500s.

The eagle eye is among the sharpest in the animal kingdom, with an eyesight estimated at 4 to 8 times stronger than that of the average human. Although an eagle may only weigh 10 pounds, its eyes are roughly the same size as those of a human. Some eagles can spot a fish in water from several hundred feet in the air, even while flying. Since the color on the top of a fish usually blends with the color of the water this is no small accomplishment.

BLIND AS A BAT

"Blind as a bat" describes someone not being able to see well. The meaning may be either literal or metaphorical. As an idiom, the term could refer to a person's inability to see another individual or relationship clearly.

Aristotle was one of the first to allude to bats' eyesight being poor well over 2,000 years ago. Because of their erratic, random flying patterns, which gave the impression that they couldn't see where they were going, people used to believe that bats were blind.

In fact, bats rely on a combination of hearing and sight to locate their prey. A study on bat behavior said that "bat brains have to constantly integrate two streams of data, obtained with two different senses, to construct a single image of the world."

Echolocation is a fascinating phenomenon which involves bats making clicking sounds as they fly around. Their excellent hearing allows them to listen for the echoes of this sound coming off insects, walls, and larger

predators, indicating where these objects are.

It's thought that this "ultrasonic hearing" developed in mammals about 230 million years ago, further setting them apart from birds in terms of hunting abilities. Echolocation is, in fact, twice as effective as vision for detecting insects in dark environments, in part due to it being unaffected by distractions, unlike vision.

But echolocation only has a range of between 10 and 20 yards. This is where bats' combination of hearing and vision is particularly useful, giving them an edge that other animals don't necessarily have. Echolocation helps bats find insects faster than any bird can. This contributes to their goal of survival in the animal world.

Typically, bats' vision is tuned to low-light environments, allowing them to see particularly well at dusk and dawn. Most bats are nocturnal, so it's likely that this is something they developed as they evolved. Their color vision may not be as good as ours, but their overall visual capabilities in low light are far better, which makes sense given that we are diurnal beings. In fact, some species of megabat have better vision than humans, even in daytime.

There's no single answer to the question of how good bats' vision is because there are over 1,300 species of bat, each with varying visual abilities. They hunt differently, too. Some eat flowers, while others live off insects and blood.

Flowers sound okay, but I think I'll stick with chocolate brownies.

HANGDOG

"Hangdog" is an adjective describing a dejected, shamed, or guilty facial expression. It can also mean a sneaky or despicable person.

The term comes from the medieval practice of trying and condemning dogs that perpetrated a "crime," such as stealing food or biting someone. It is not clear whether the word hangdog refers to someone who is so low in status that his job is to hang a dog, or if the word refers to the expression on a condemned dog's face.

THE STRAW THAT BROKE THE CAMEL'S BACK

"The straw that broke the camel's back" describes a minor or routine action that causes an unpredictably large and sudden reaction, because of the cumulative effect of small actions.

The straw that broke the camel's back was one straw too many. An Arabian anecdote told of a camel whose owner loaded the beast of burden with as much straw as possible. Not satisfied with the staggering load he had put on the camel, the owner added just one last piece of straw. That one wisp was too much, and the animal collapsed with a broken back, leaving the owner with no way to take his goods to the market. The story is a parable for all the times you've been repeatedly irked until you can't take it anymore and you explode.

The idiom gave rise to the phrase "the last straw," meaning that the last one in a line of unacceptable occurrences causes a seemingly sudden and strong reaction.

The earliest known version of the expression is seen in the latter half of the 1600s.

Other versions of the proverb include:

"It is the last feather that breaks the horse's back."

"The last peppercorn breaks the camel's back."

"The melon that broke the monkey's back."

"The hair that broke the camel's back."

The same sentiment is also expressed by the phrase "the last drop makes the cup run over," first found in English in 1655. This image of the last drop is found in many other languages.

The phrase has been compared with Seneca's discussion on why death is not to be feared. Starting with "we do not suddenly fall on death but advance towards it by slight degrees; we die every day," Seneca compares life to a water-clock. "It is not the last drop that empties the water-clock, but all that which previously has flowed out; similarly, the final hour when we cease to exist does not of itself bring death; it merely of itself completes the death-process. We reach death at that moment, but we have been a long time on the way."

HAPPY AS A HOG IN MUD

Or, as most people know it, "happy as a pig in shit." In other words, very happy. This idiom originated in Britain around the mid-1800s.

In the 1860s it was common to see "happy as a pig in clover," or "happy as a pig in a puddle." The important thing is, should you have a pig, that you figure out what causes it to be happy, and then work to procure it.

HE THINKS THE SUN COMES UP JUST TO HEAR HIM CROW

This idiom describes a cocky individual who believes that when he speaks, everyone should listen.

The saying is based on the fact that roosters usually crow when the sun rises. This typically wakes the house and pretty much anyone else who lives nearby.

The phrase has been around at least since the 1800s. Roosters have been around forever. Alarm clocks last only until thrown against the wall.

SQUEEZE A NICKEL TILL THE BUFFALO SCREAMS

To "squeeze a nickel till the buffalo screams" means to be extremely tight with money.

This phrase refers to the five-cent coin known as a Buffalo nickel, or Indian Head nickel, that was struck by the US Mint from 1913 to 1938. It was designed by US sculptor James Earle Fraser, and featured a Native American on one side and a bison on the other.

I used to "pinch pennies" until they all disappeared.

ALL HAT AND NO CATTLE

The American expression, "all hat and no cattle," describes someone who talks big but doesn't act. It may also refer to people who pretend to be something they aren't.

The phrase arose in reference to cattle ranchers and the big hats they often wear, but also to people wearing cowboy hats as fashion, to give the impression that they're tough cowboys. The allusion is clearly to the over-sized Stetson "ten-gallon" hat which came into use in 1925. They do not, of course, hold anything like ten gallons.

The earliest printed example of the expression found thus far is from *The Oklahoma News*, February 1937.

Many people associate the phrase with Texas, which does have a lot of cattle. And quite a few citizens who claim that whatever Texas has, it's bigger than any other state's.

IF YOU LIE DOWN WITH DOGS, YOU GET UP WITH FLEAS

This early English proverb isn't really about dogs or fleas. What it means is

that you should be cautious about the company you keep. Human failings like dishonesty or immorality are contagious. The idea is that if you mix with bad people, you will yourself become bad.

"If you lie down with dogs, you get up with fleas" dates from the 1500s, a time when people had a closer acquaintance with fleas than they do now.

The expression is first found in print in the English writer James J. Sanforde's *Garden of Pleasure*, 1573, a collection of proverbs and witty sayings.

Human priorities are peculiar. We can go to the moon, which is just a big, bare hunk of rock, but we don't know how to get rid of fleas forever. Or the common cold, either.

THAT DOG WON'T HUNT

The expression "that dog won't hunt" means "that won't work; forget it!"

It originated in the late 1800s American South, where dogs are commonly used to hunt raccoons and other wild animals. You might say of a financing proposal, "It looks good on paper, but that dog won't hunt."

It's modelled on the 1600s phrase "that cock won't fight." In the days of cock-fighting, a cock that wouldn't fight when put into the pit was a natural metaphor for a plan or theory that simply wouldn't work. A similar sporting metaphor from horse-racing is used when we say that a plan or theory "isn't a runner."

TIGHT AS A TICK

"Tight as a tick" is used in several different ways.

(1) Very tight, like a tick stuck firmly in someone's skin. "This lid is screwed on tight as a tick." Another example: "The windows were closed tight as a tick to keep the cold out."

(2) Extremely drunk. "The host got tight as a tick and fell in the pool."

(3) Extremely competitive, as in a race, if the racers are moving very closely together. "This election is as tight as a tick."

(4) Very friendly and close, or as thick as thieves. "Those two are tight as a tick. They are always together."

(5) Fully inflated; swollen near to bursting, like a tire over-filled with air.

(6) Unwilling to spend money. If you ever try to separate ten dollars from a miser, you will realize how tightly he hangs onto it.

The simile "as full as a tick" occurs in a late 1600s proverb collection, referring to the way in which the blood-sucking insects swell as they gorge themselves. In the modern version, "tight as a tick," there is a play on 'tight' as an informal synonym for 'drunk' and its literal meaning 'stretched taut,' like a tick satiated with blood.

MAD AS A WET HEN

"Mad as a wet hen" and "mad as a hornet" are phrases that mean extremely angry, enraged, or exasperated. They were coined in the US in the early half of the 1800s.

The word "mad," in this instance, means angry. This is different from the British English phrase "mad as a hatter," in which the word mad means insane.

Chickens don't like being wet. Some small birds, such as robins or sparrows, enjoy having a bath in water. Larger birds, such as eagles, will dive into water after a fish. But chickens have dust baths, where they kick and flap dust around the same way small birds spray water in a bird bath. If dunked in water, they get very upset.

There are several expressions formed from the behavior of chickens, such as putting all your eggs in one basket, fussing like an old hen, ruling the roost, and getting up with the chickens. Doubtless if you do get madder than a wet hen, people are likely to be walking on eggshells around you.

LOOSE AS A GOOSE

"Loose as a goose" means being completely relaxed.

This phrase, probably popular because of the rhyme, dates from the first half of the 1900s. In earlier usage it sometimes denoted sexual promiscuity (loose morals), diarrhea (loose bowels), and so on but, since about 1950, it has mostly stuck to its present meaning.

DON'T COUNT YOUR CHICKENS BEFORE THEY HATCH

This proverb means that you shouldn't depend on something you hope will happen until you know for certain that it actually will happen.

"Don't count your chickens (before they hatch)" uses the example of counting the eggs that chickens have laid and assuming that every egg will result in a healthy chick.

The proverb was first attested in English in Thomas Howell's 1570 *New Sonnets and Pretty Pamphlets*, perhaps based on similar medieval fables and maxims.

The fable goes something like this: A milkmaid has a pail of milk that she plans to sell. She imagines selling the milk for a good price and using the money to buy some eggs, which will all hatch. Then she'll raise the chickens and sell them for a good price and buy herself a new hat. Unfortunately, she spills the milk and thus ruins all her plans.

RUN AROUND LIKE A CHICKEN WITH ITS HEAD CUT OFF

To "run around like a chicken with its head cut off" means being frantic or in a frenzy. Chickens are known to twitch and even stagger around for several minutes after being decapitated, the result of a reflexive response. A person suffering extreme emotional agitation exhibits the same sort of fowl play. (Thanks to the Free Dictionary for that one!)

The phrase was known in the US by the late 1800s.

Just like a human, a chicken has special fibers called "nerves," which run like tiny wires all through its body. These nerves make a chicken keep moving, even after its head has been chopped off. The pressure of the axe triggers all the nerve endings in the neck, causing that little burst of electricity to run down all the nerves leading back to the muscles, to tell them to move. The chicken flaps its wings and runs around, even though it's already dead. This is called a "reflex action."

DON'T PUT ALL YOUR EGGS IN ONE BASKET

This proverb advises you not to risk all you have on the success or failure of one thing. In money matters, for example, you should diversify your portfolio and spread the risk across different assets.

The use of "don't put all your eggs in one basket" has been traced to the novel *Don Quixote* written by Miguel de Cervantes in the early 1600s.

The idea originated from the experience of collecting chicken eggs each day. Eggs are highly fragile, and if you drop the basket, all the eggs will break. But if you place the eggs in two baskets and then drop one, you'd

still have at least one basket of eggs.

Dropping a basket of eggs is not a good way to make an omelet.

IN A PIG'S EYE

The phrase "in a pig's eye" is used to express scornful disbelief at a statement or a strong opinion that something cannot happen. In one word, "Never!" For example, if you say to your buddy, "The Cubs will win the World Series next year," his response might well be "In a pig's eye!" Or possibly, "When pigs fly!"

Sometimes we change the wording and say, "in a pig's ear" or "in a pig's snout."

Several sources have been suggested for this Americanism from the late 1800s. One theory is that it's a euphemism for "in a pig's ass," which came from a bawdy song. But we really don't know where the phrase originated.

IN A PIG'S EAR

The phrase "in a pig's ear," however, has more meanings than "in a pig's eye." Like the latter, it is an expression of disbelief, an exclamation of emphatic denial or dissent.

As "pig's ear," the phrase becomes Cockney rhyming slang for beer. It's one of the earliest examples of the form and appears in D. W. Barrett's *Life & Work among Navvies*, 1880. "Now, Jack, I'm goin' to get a tiddley wink of pig's ear." "Tiddley wink" is also Cockney slang, of course, and means "drink."

As "make a pig's ear of," it means to make a mess, to do something badly. For example, "He's made a real pig's ear of that bookcase he was supposed to be making." This phrase is first found in print in a 1950 edition of the *Reader's Digest*.

The expression derives from the old proverb "you can't make a silk purse out of a sow's ear," which dates from the 1500s. An English clergyman, Stephen Gosson, published a romantic story *Ephemerides* in 1579 and in it referred to people who were engaged in a hopeless task: "Seekinge too make a silke purse of a Soves eare."

Make a silk purse from a pig's ear? In a pig's eye!

DON'T BUY A PIG IN A POKE

The proverb, "Don't buy a pig in a poke," advises you not to accept an offer or make a deal without making sure that you're getting what you bargained for. This advice was first found in written form circa 1555.

The advice being given is "don't buy a pig until you have seen it." This is enshrined in commercial law in many countries as *caveat emptor*, Latin for "let the buyer beware." It means that if you buy something, you take responsibility for inspecting it to make sure it is what you intended to buy. In common law, buyers have the right to inspect goods before purchase.

A "poke" is a sack or bag. Poke is still in use in several English-speaking countries, notably Scotland and the US, and describes just the sort of bag that would be useful for carrying a piglet to market. And, because a cat or a small dog is much the same size as a suckling pig, one would need to check what was actually in the poke before buying.

We buy a pig in a poke every time we shop online. Yes, the seller can provide images and even videos of the product. But without holding it in your hands or trying it out yourself, you really don't know what you're getting.

Surprises aren't always fun.

GET ONE'S GOAT

To "get one's goat" means to make one angry, annoyed, upset, or irritated.

This term is American in origin, but the etymology is uncertain. A very popular theory says that it came from the practice of putting a goat inside a racehorse's stall. The presence of the goat had a relaxing influence on the horse and, because the goat was a permanent companion, the horse became attached to the goat. Villains who wanted the horse to lose a race might sneak in and steal the goat. That is, they "got someone's goat." The horse became unsettled, ran badly, and the villains won their bets.

But there's no evidence to support the story, or for the many more far-fetched ideas about where the phrase came from. Other people have tried to connect it in some way with scapegoat, or a variant form of goad, or men's goatee beards, or goats generally being silly.

I'd rather watch a goat being silly than let someone get my goat.

STUBBORN AS A MULE

Being "stubborn as a mule" means being extremely stubborn. However, the mule got a bad rap in this idiom and its reputation as ornery, malicious, and obstinate is undeserved.

Donkeys and mules are widely seen as stubborn. But they're smart. A scientific study showed that when it came to showing flexibility toward solving a problem (learning to learn), mules came out on top, followed by donkeys, with horses and dogs bringing up the rear. They also have a strong tendency toward self-preservation. They won't let owners overwork them, nor will they typically put themselves in danger. These characteristics led to the "stubborn" label.

Many a mule driver would dispute that. If a mule does not want to go, it takes a big effort to get it going. The impression of mulish obstinacy is of long standing, but with no good grounds, according to *The Oxford English Dictionary*.

A mule is not a separate animal species, like a horse or donkey. It's a hybrid, or the product of two other species — in this case, the pairing of a male donkey with a female horse. Donkeys have 62 chromosomes and horses have 64; mules are born with 63. This odd number of chromosomes means they can't reproduce.

The mule combines the strength of the horse with the endurance and surefootedness of the ass and is extensively bred for certain employments for which it is more suited than either. Properly, "mule" means the offspring of a he-ass and a mare; that of a she-ass and a stallion is technically a "hinny."

The meaning of mule as "obstinate, stupid, or stubborn person" is from the 1470s. "Mule" has also mean "loose slipper" since the 1560s. As a type of spinning machine, it is attested from 1793 (as mule-jenny, 1788), so called because it is a "hybrid" of Arkwright's drawing-rollers and Hargreaves' jenny. The underworld slang sense of "narcotics smuggler or courier for a drug trafficker" appeared by 1935. The mule-deer of Western US (1805) is so called for its large ears.

"Stubborn as a mule" sounds better than "pig-headed," though.

CRY WOLF

To "cry wolf" is to ask for help when you don't need it. It means to sound a false alarm or deceive others by warning about a non-existent danger, usually to get attention. If you cry wolf too many times, though, no one will believe you when you're really hurt.

The origin of the expression 'cry wolf' comes from one of Aesop's fables, *The Boy Who Cried Wolf*. In the story, a young shepherd amuses himself by crying "wolf" to enjoy the panic he causes in the community. He lies about a wolf threatening his flock so many times that people do not believe him when a real wolf trots out of the forest and he and his flock are in legitimate danger. He ends up running away, while the wolf attacks and kills the sheep he was supposed to be protecting.

The moral, says Aesop, is that "A liar will not be believed, even when he speaks the truth."

EAT LIKE A BIRD

To "eat like a bird" means to eat very little, or to peck at one's food.

The phrase comes from the misconception that birds don't eat much, and that they appear to merely peck away at tiny bits of seed and other food. In fact, however, they do eat quite a lot relative to their size. Some insect-eating songbirds chow down every two seconds and a hummingbird consumes twice its weight in nectar every day. This is due to the high metabolism that birds possess, which requires them to constantly replenish their energy levels through frequent feeding.

In print, the phrase dates to at least the 1700s. To "eat like a horse," based on the idea that horses eat a great deal, is from the same era. But horses need to eat a lot because grass and hay don't contain much protein.

Eating like a pig, as you might expect, merely means to be sloppy with your food.

HAPPY AS A CLAM

If you're "happy as a clam," you're very happy and content.

The saying originated in America during the early 1800s, from the longer expression "happy as a clam at high tide."

Why would clams be happy at high tide? Because that's when they're safe from predators, particularly humans, who want to dig them up and turn them into dinner.

A clam is a bivalve — an invertebrate sporting a shell divided into two separate sections. It also has a strong foot that burrows into sand. People go clamming at low tide when it's much easier to find the buried bivalves.

THE BEE'S KNEES

When you say that something is "the bee's knees," you're saying that it is the height of excellence or the very best.

The singular "bee's knee" was originally a 1700s fanciful phrase meaning something insignificant or nonexistent. It was used as the kind of spoof item that apprentices would be sent to the stores to fetch, such as tartan paint or a left-handed hammer.

"The bee's knees," however, came into use during the Roaring Twenties, when flappers compared almost anything they considered excellent to a part of an animal. Similar expressions include "the canary's tusks," "the kipper's knickers," "the flea's eyebrows," "the sardine's whiskers," "the eel's ankle," "the clam's garter," "the cat's pajamas," "the snake's hips," and so on.

It couldn't hurt that "bees" and "knees" rhymed, making it fun to say. Even more fun, perhaps, was a Prohibition era cocktail called "the bee's knees." It was made with gin, fresh lemon juice, and honey and served shaken and chilled, often with a lemon twist.

Did the phrase have a more serious origin? Like all insects, bees have six sections to their legs. Each segment connects to the next by a joint, but bees do not have knees as we think of them. Some posit that since bees have sacs on the back of their leg segments to carry pollen, "the bee's knees" was a reference to the fact that pollen was an excellent thing.

Another tenuous connection may be to Bee Jackson. Ms. Jackson was a dancer in 1920s New York and popularised the Charleston. She went on to become the World Champion Charleston dancer and was quite celebrated at the time.

I think we need both an etymologist and an entomologist for this one.

YOU CAN'T TEACH AN OLD DOG NEW TRICKS

This proverb means that you can't make dogs or people, particularly older ones, change their established patterns of opinion and behavior.

This may be one of the oldest proverbs in the language. It's mentioned in *A Dialogue conteinyng the nomber in effect of all the Prouerbes in the Englishe tongue*, 1546. The earliest example of it in print is in John Fitzherbert's *The Boke of Husbandry*, 1534. Several such sources refer to it as an "old saying."

The proverb is not really true in the canine world. You can teach old dogs plenty of things. In fact, almost any command, skill, or trick that you can teach a puppy, you can teach an older dog. It might just take a little longer.

The proverb isn't true for humans, either. But the key is motivation, the desire to learn.

One of these days, I might figure out how to properly use a cell phone.

QUICK BITES

BEAVER AWAY—work very hard at something, like a beaver building a dam.

SCARCE AS HEN'S TEETH—rare or non-existent; birds don't have teeth.

USELESS AS TITS ON A BULL—totally useless and unnecessary.



FOODFEST

A "foodfest" is a festival, a social gathering where food and drink are served in large quantities. It can include picnics, beverage tastings, potluck-style dinners, and even eating contests for the more adventurous.

My dictionary says, "food is any substance consumed by an organism for nutritional support." True, but food is so much more than that. It tastes and smells good, looks good, and provides a great excuse for people to get together and party.

Food festivals throughout the world celebrate farming, the seasons of the year, special events, and the food culture of an area. Contemporary festivals may be commercial, their success measured by how much revenue they generate. Successful or not, they serve to unite communities. Modern food festivals are also a large part of the food tourism industry.

There are many sayings about food. For example, "That coffee's so strong it'll put hair on your chest."

Others include:

- Beets will give you beautiful skin.
- Spinach will make you strong.
- Fish will make you smarter.
- Carrots will make you see better.
- If you eat the crusts on bread, it will make your hair curly. Would that be the hair I got from drinking strong coffee?

Did you know that your belly button is for putting salt in and dipping celery sticks? I've never done it, but my grandad swore it was true.

TOMATO

A "tomato" is called both a fruit and a vegetable. Botanically, a tomato is a fruit—a berry. However, it's considered a "culinary vegetable" because it has a lower sugar content than most fruits. It's more savory than sweet, so it is typically served as part of a salad or main course of a meal, rather than as a dessert. Other fruits, such as bell peppers, cucumbers, green beans, eggplants, avocados, and squashes of all kinds are all botanically fruit, yet regarded and cooked as vegetables.

The word comes from Spanish *tomate*, and the Nahuatl (Aztecan) *tomatl*, said to mean literally "the swelling fruit." The older English name for it before the 1700s was "love-apple." An encyclopedia of 1753 describes it as

"a fruit eaten either stewed or raw."

Green's Dictionary of Slang lists several figurative meanings for the word "tomato," including: the buttocks, a pimp, a prostitute, a stolen car, a clever person, a fool, and an attractive woman. "Rotten tomato" is a common expression for a tomato that's past its prime and "gone bad." It's used figuratively to describe a person who has turned to crime or bad behavior.

The species originated in South and Central America, and in Mexico. The Aztecs were using tomatoes in their cooking when the Spanish conquered the Aztec Empire circa 1520. After having a taste, the Spanish brought the plant to Europe. From there, the tomato was introduced to the Philippines and all of Asia and the rest, as they say, is history.

I love tomatoes but rarely eat them fresh anymore unless they're home-grown. Commercial varieties lack sugar and taste because breeders are intent on growing tomatoes which ripen uniformly red and have improved yield, size, shelf life, and resistance to various environmental pressures, including disease.

Perhaps that's why the town of Buñol, Spain, annually celebrates *La Tomatina*, a festival centered on an enormous tomato fight. On 30 August 2007, 40,000 Spaniards gathered to throw 254,000 lbs. of tomatoes at each other in the festival. On the other hand, maybe they got that idea from the tradition of throwing rotten tomatoes at bad performers on stage during the 1800s.

I guess actors in the 1800s qualified for danger pay.

HOT POTATO

If you describe a problem as a "hot potato," you're saying it's a sensitive matter that is very difficult to deal with. Imagine pulling a hot, cooked potato out of an oven and juggling it between two hands while it cools. A "hot potato" can be social, political, personal, or anything else that might figuratively burn your fingers.

The term originated in the mid 1800s and is derived from the slightly older phrase "to drop like a hot potato," meaning "to abandon something or someone quickly" (lest one be burned). It alludes to the fact that cooked potatoes retain considerable heat because they contain a lot of water.

In baseball, a hot potato is a ball thrown, kicked, or batted so hard that a receiving player cannot catch it. Again, if a ball is mistakenly thrown to an umpire when there are runners still on base, the umpire will treat the ball like it is a "hot potato" and try not to catch it, since it is still in play.

Hot potato is also a game played by children. The children sit in a circle. While music plays, the children pass a bean bag or similar item around, quickly, so they will not be caught holding the "hot potato" when the music stops. The child holding the hot potato when the music stops is eliminated, and play continues until there is a victor.

Potatoes have been food for us for a long time. They were domesticated in Peru and Bolivia about 7,000–10,000 years ago. The Royal Spanish Academy says the Spanish word, "patata," is a hybrid of the Taíno *batata* (sweet potato) and the Quechua *papa* (potato). Potatoes were in cultivation in Spain by the mid 1500s. Portuguese traders carried the crop to all their shipping ports and the potato was quickly adopted from Africa to India and Java. Today, there are over 5,000 different types of potatoes.

The French for potato is *pomme de terre*, literally "earth-apple," which indicates that potatoes were regarded as valuable. In line with that, if you say something is "small potatoes," you mean that it is unimportant.

Big or small, hot or cold, potatoes are very important.

SPUD

The ultimate origin of the word "spud" isn't known. It first appeared in English around 1440 and referred to a short dagger, possibly arising from the Latin *spad* (sword). Later, it described sharp, narrow spades used to dig up large plants, such as potatoes. Around the mid 1800s, the word began to be applied to the potato itself. This slang term caught on wherever English was spoken and remains in use to this day.

The origin of the word spud has erroneously been attributed to a 1700s activist group dedicated to keeping the potato out of Britain, calling itself the Society for the Prevention of Unwholesome Diet (SPUD), for whose existence there is no evidence. The initials of the main words in this title gave rise to spud. Like many other claimed pre-20th century acronymic origins, this is a fun story but false.

Before the mid-1900s, while abbreviations were prevalent in text, pronouncing them as words was uncommon, being something of a very modern phenomenon. These days, news stories abound in acronyms, and often, I must resort to Google to find out what they're talking about.

PIECE OF CAKE

"A piece of cake" means something very easy to do. Something that's a

piece of cake is as easy as eating a delicious piece of cake.

The Americanism "cakewalk," used to mean "something easy," came first, in the 1860's. "Piece of cake" wasn't used until around 1936. Both cake and pie have a long history in the US as metaphors for things that present no problems. The expression became popular in the Royal Air Force in the late 1930s for an easy mission.

EASY AS PIE

If something is "easy as pie," it's very easy. Pies aren't easy to make, though; the ease and pleasure is in the eating.

This phrase was coined in America in the 1800s. The usage first came in the phrase "as nice as pie," found in *Which: Right or Left?* in 1855: "For nearly a week afterwards, the domestics observed significantly to each other, that Miss Isabella was as 'nice as pie!'" There are some claims that its use in New Zealand in the 1920s was influenced by the similar expressions from the Maori term *pai*, meaning "good."

Mark Twain frequently used just "pie" to mean pleasant or accommodating. In *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, 1884, "You're always as polite as pie to them."

Pie and cake both seem to rank right up there in the US lexicon of ease and pleasantries. They "rank right up there" with me, too, but because my tongue likes them so much.

CHEESEPARING

"Cheeseparing," as a noun, means something as worthless or insignificant as a paring of cheese rind. As an adjective, it means miserly economizing, unwillingness to spend money, parsimonious, stingy, or penny-pinching, and arose circa 1590-1600.

Those familiar with William Shakespeare's history play *Henry IV* may recall how the portly Falstaff remembered the thin Justice Shallow "like a man made after supper of a cheeseparing." Falstaff's unusual food simile is memorable, and people began to associate cheeseparings (bits of cheese trimmed off a larger portion) with other things of little value.

IF YOU CAN'T STAND THE HEAT, GET OUT OF THE KITCHEN

This proverb advises you to either stop complaining about a difficult activity or stop doing it. The implication is that if you can't cope, you should leave

the work to someone who can.

Harry S. Truman was known to have used it at least as early as 1942, before becoming president. Here's a citation from an Idaho newspaper *The Soda Springs Sun*, from July of that year: "Favorite rejoinder of Senator Harry S. Truman, when a member of his war contracts investigating committee objects to his strenuous pace: 'If you don't like the heat, get out of the kitchen.'"

Truman was well-known as a plain-speaker. This was celebrated by Merle Miller, who published a set of interviews with him, called *Plain Speaking: An Oral Biography of Harry S. Truman*, in 1974. It includes this unambiguous gem, which would hardly get past the presidential spin-machine these days:

"I didn't fire him [General MacArthur] because he was a dumb son of a bitch, although he was, but that's not against the law for generals. If it was, half to three quarters of them would be in jail."

It's satisfying to hear a politician telling it like it is.

PIE HOLE

"Pie hole" is an American term for a person's mouth. Obviously, the idea is that the mouth is where someone puts bites of pie. It's often used in the phrase "Shut your pie hole!" which means "Be quiet!"

Interestingly, the term "pie hole" has only been in use since the 1980s, though there is a British term, "cake hole," that was in use in Britain during World War II and recorded in the book *Service Slang* written by Hunt and Pringle in 1943.

I'm sure Harry S. Truman would say "Shut up!" rather than "Shut your pie hole."

THE BEST THING SINCE SLICED BREAD

The term "the best thing since sliced bread" is applied to something or someone that is very good or very useful. Synonyms include: the height of genius, the epitome of perfection, and one in a million.

In 1928, the Chillicothe Baking Company became the first company to sell sliced bread. Its advertising for sliced bread included the sentence, "The greatest forward step in the baking industry since bread was wrapped." It is thought by most etymologists that this ad was the source of "the best thing since sliced bread."

The first record of the idiom may date to 1952, when the famous comedian Red Skelton said in an interview with the *Salisbury Times*: "Don't worry about television. It's the greatest thing since sliced bread."

The making of bread is one of the oldest food technologies, going back to the Neolithic era, and linked with the brewing of beer. Humans began grinding cattail, a plant still found in wetland habitats today, into flour approximately thirty thousand years ago. These humans eventually discovered that cooking or baking the flour made it taste better.

At some point, humans discovered that if bread was left out in the open, spores of yeast, a naturally forming microorganism that floats through the air, would infiltrate the ground grain, and make it "rise." Leavened bread and the use of yeast in bread-making began around four thousand years ago in ancient Egypt. Today, though, we still eat certain types of unleavened bread, like naan, matzah, and flour or corn tortillas.

The domestication of wheat allowed people to transition from hunters, gatherers, and nomads to farmers, growers, and urban dwellers. Bread was baked in every household and was eaten at most meals.

It was also one of the first food products to succumb to automatic machinery, from the mass grinding and bleaching of flour, kneading of dough, baking in continuous ovens, and, finally, to the slicing and wrapping of the bread. Much of the mechanization came from Europe in the 1800s but peaked in the American Midwest during the 1920s and 1930s.

In 1930, *Wonder Bread* became the first mass-produced bread to be pre-sliced and was America's favorite bread. While bread had been used since the 1600s to clean the frescoes on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel, *Wonder Bread* proved to be an especially effective sponge in the most recent restoration of Michelangelo's masterpiece.

And toast? It's likely that toast originated as a way to preserve bread. Scorched slices of bread lasted longer as a palatable food.

The practice of toasting bread became popular in the Roman Empire. The word "toast" comes from the Latin *tostum*, which means "to burn or scorch." The first breads were likely toasted by laying them in front of the fire on a hot stone. Later, simple devices were created to toast bread in the fire, such as wire frames to cook the toast more evenly, or even sticks like those we use to toast marshmallows over a campfire today.

The modern, timed, pop-up toaster was created in 1919. And, after the Chillicothe Baking Company advertisements began in 1928, I'll bet people

were saying that the toaster was "the best thing since sliced bread." And quite possibly, "the best thing for sliced bread."

THE APPLE NEVER FALLS FAR FROM THE TREE

"The apple never falls far from the tree" means that children tend to resemble their parents in appearance and behavior. Synonyms include: "a chip off the old block," and "like father, like son."

Ralph Waldo Emerson is credited with the first known use of the phrase in the US, inspired by an old German proverb. It translated as, "As men say, the apple never falls far from the stem."

It's difficult to date and pin down the origin of the saying. All the early uses of it in English refer to it as a translation from one of several different European languages. It's variously ascribed to Icelanders, Germans, and Danes. All we know is that it came into English in or about the 1830s.

AN APPLE A DAY KEEPS THE DOCTOR AWAY

"An apple a day keeps the doctor away" is a common proverb that appeared in the 1800s, advocating for the consumption of apples, and by extension, "if one eats healthful foods, one will be in good health and not need to see the doctor often."

A variant of the proverb, "Eat an apple on going to bed, and you'll keep the doctor from earning his bread," was recorded as a Pembrokeshire saying in 1866.

Apples have a good claim for promoting health. They contain Vitamin C, which aids the immune system, and phenols, which reduce cholesterol. They also reduce tooth decay by cleaning one's teeth and killing off bacteria. It has been suggested by Cornell University researchers that the quercetin found in apples protects brain cells against neuro-degenerative disorders like Alzheimer's Disease.

A 2013 study concluded that eating an apple a day "is able to match modern medicine and is likely to have fewer side effects."

Not only that, apples taste good. Especially in apple pie.

TOO MANY COOKS SPOIL THE BROTH

The old proverb, "too many cooks spoil the broth," suggests that too many people working on the same project can lead to an inferior result. A similar

saying is, "too many chiefs and not enough Indians."

In 1575, the English historian John Hooker wrote *The Life and Times of Sir Peter Carew*, in which he included the line, "There is the proverb, the more cooks the worse potage." If Hooker considered the notion proverbial in 1575, it must be one of the earliest proverbs that are still with us today.

In the 1970s, the American computer scientist Fred Brooks wrote an essay entitled *The Mythical Man Month*. He argued that, contrary to apparent intuition, adding more personnel to a project that was overdue would slow it down even further rather than speeding it up. His work became widely accepted in business and is still influential.

Too many people working on a project often results in nothing getting done, possibly because everyone thinks someone else will do it, or because of conflicts over direction. Another problem is that each person may make decisions without consulting the rest.

I have always found, in my kitchen ventures, that it's easier to do a task myself than it is to organize other people to do it. Of course, that also means that if the venture is a flop, I have to take all the blame.

YOU CAN'T HAVE YOUR CAKE AND EAT IT TOO

The common proverb, "you can't have your cake and eat it too" means that it's impossible to satisfy two opposite desires. Similar phrases are, "you can't have it both ways," and "you can't have the best of both worlds."

The wisdom of this old saying is found worldwide. For example, in Russian the phrase is "You can't sit on two chairs." The Albanian proverb says you cannot take a swim and not get wet, and the German saying states you cannot dance at two weddings at the same time.

An early recording of the phrase is seen in a letter dated 14 March 1538 from Thomas, Duke of Norfolk, to Thomas Cromwell, as "a man can not have his cake and eat his cake."

In Jonathan Swift's 1738 farce *Polite Conversation*, the character Lady Answerall says, "She cannot eat her cake and have her cake."

All of which reminds me of the tale of an Eskimo paddling his canoe in the icy sea. He decided to light a stove to keep warm. The canoe caught fire and sank, leading to the punch line, "You can't have your kayak and heat it too."

HOT ENOUGH TO FRY EGGS ON THE SIDEWALK

The origin of the saying is not clear, though it's referenced in the *Los Angeles Times* on October 5, 1933, and even as far back as June 11, 1899, in *The Atlanta Constitution*.

That said, eggs need to reach a temperature of 158 Fahrenheit to cook through.

According to an experiment reported in Robert Wolke's book, *What Einstein Told His Cook: Kitchen Science Explained*, sidewalk temperatures vary. Dark objects absorb more light, so blacktop paving would be hotter than concrete. But sidewalks are usually concrete, and Wolke found that such a sidewalk might only get up to 145 Fahrenheit. Also, the cracked egg cools the sidewalk slightly. Pavement of any kind is a poor conductor of heat, so lacking an additional heat source from below or from the side, the egg will not cook evenly.

The hood of a car is a better option. Metal conducts heat faster and gets hotter, so people have been able to cook an egg on a car hood's surface.

But the idea of cooking an egg on a sidewalk won't die. The city of Oatman, Arizona, hosts an annual *Solar Egg Frying Contest* on the 4th of July. Contestants get 15 minutes to try, using sun power alone. Some aids are allowed, however, such as mirrors, aluminum reflectors, or magnifying glasses. Eggs also have a small advantage in Arizona, the land of low humidity and high heat. Liquids evaporate rapidly when humidity is low. The eggs have a bit of "help" while they cook, and they dry out faster.

I'm not a fan of high heat so, when other people are trying to fry eggs on the sidewalk, I will be up to my neck in a bathtub full of ice cubes.

HEARD IT ON THE GRAPEVINE

If you say, "I heard it on the grapevine," that means that you heard the information by the informal means of gossip and rumor, and it may or may not be true.

The term "grapevine telegraph" was coined in the US and is associated with the telegraph system invented in the 1800s by Samuel Morse. It was first recorded in a dictionary in 1852. The term "bush telegraph" originated in Australia. That referred to the informal network that passed information about police movements to convicts who were hiding in the bush. In the UK, the term was "jungle telegraph," referring to communications in outposts of the British Empire around the same period.

A similar expression, "clothesline telegraph," appeared during the Civil War. The March 22, 1862, *Cambridge Chronicle* describes Southern women who spread Confederate propaganda as "tattlers, and operators upon the clothesline telegraph, mischief makers."

One theory about the origin of the phrase is that people thought telegraph wires and poles looked like the strings used to train grapevines, so the telegraph lines became known as "the grapevine."

The phrase grew in popularity during the Civil War when communication through the "grapevine" became important. But it was also questionable, as Confederate soldiers were known to try to spread misinformation to confuse Union forces.

A false theory is that in the late 1800s and early 1900s, people would congregate at The Old Grapevine, a tavern in New York City. Like most bars, rumors and gossip flowed freely, and it was therefore possible to hear something interesting at the Grapevine.

My source of gossip is "a little bird."

HAVE A BUN IN THE OVEN

To "have a bun in the oven" is to be pregnant. It's an old idiom, in use since the 1600s, with the bun describing the baby and the oven being the woman's womb.

In Australia, it would be, "She's got a joey in the pouch."



ON THE TAKE

"Take" is a simple, unassuming, little, four-letter verb which, in very basic terms, means getting something into one's control. It can also be used as a noun.

Is the word easy to say and spell? Yes.

Is it easy to define? NO.

My *Random House Unabridged Dictionary* (2003) provides 124 definitions, or shades of meaning. The synonyms are endless. *Britannica Dictionary* lists 299 idioms.

Humans use some words a lot. "Hit" (*see Chapter "Hit the Road, Jack"*) is one of them and must have been one of the first things we learned in caveman days. "Take" is another such word. We're good at taking game, taking care, taking a chance, taking time, etc. etc. In fact, "take" is one of the commonest verbs in the English language.

As a noun, "take" is defined as follows.

- a distinct point of view
- a scene filmed, or a song recorded without stopping
- a successful union (as of a graft)
- amount of money earned or received
- catch, haul

For the multi-purpose verb, rather than deal with 124 definitions, I will make just two lists, the phrasal verbs and the idioms, a much friendlier way of describing its versatility.

A phrasal verb contains the verb plus a preposition, an adverb, or both. Very common in English, they are important because the verb meaning often changes significantly when used as a phrasal verb. For example, "grow" usually means to become larger, but "grow up" means to become an adult or start behaving in a mature way.

Here are the "take" phrasal verbs, with their assorted meanings:

TAKE ABACK

- surprise or shock someone

TAKE AFTER

- resemble another person
- follow or chase

TAKE AGAINST

- begin to dislike

TAKE APART

- disassemble
- badly beat a person or team in a contest
- examine or analyze closely; dissect

TAKE AWAY

- remove; cause someone to go away
- remember something for possible use
- buy a meal and carry it to another place
- subtract; reduce the value of something

TAKE BACK

- return, as for exchange
- regain possession of
- resume a relationship
- cause to remember the past
- retract your words

TAKE DOWN

- cause to descend
- disassemble
- record in writing
- to humble: "take down a peg"
- remove something from where it was
- lower: "take your pants down"

TAKE FOR

- regard as: "do you take me for a fool?"
- consider mistakenly: "take silence for approval"

TAKE IN

- make a piece of clothing smaller
- provide lodging for
- grasp the meaning of; comprehend
- deceive or trick
- observe, notice
- visit or attend
- receive as payment or earnings
- take to a police station

- allow water, air, etc. to enter your body
- include, encompass
- allow admittance

TAKE OFF

- depart, leave
- leave the ground, as an airplane
- move on with a burst of speed
- achieve sudden, marked growth or success
- remove something; withdraw
- lead away
- subtract, as a discount
- imitate, mimic, burlesque

TAKE ON

- hire someone
- accept as a client
- undertake
- accept as a challenge or opponent
- acquire
- allow to enter: "the train took on passengers"

TAKE OUT

- remove, withdraw
- kill or destroy
- escort, as on a date
- deduct
- procure by application
- beat someone in a competition
- carry out for consumption elsewhere

TAKE OVER

- assume management or responsibility: "take over for me"

TAKE THROUGH

- explain the details: "take me through that day hour by hour"

TAKE TO

- go to or into: "he took to the airwaves"
- respond favorably to: "they took to each other"
- acquire a habit: "he took to drinking"
- use something: "take a mop to this floor"

TAKE UP

- continue or resume

- fill, occupy, or consume (space, time, etc.)
- begin studying or practicing: "take up art lessons"
- undertake; assume
- absorb (a liquid)
- deal with
- make shorter, as by hemming
- lift or pick up
- accept, as an offer or challenge
- raise for discussion or consideration
- begin to advocate or support; sponsor
- make tighter, as by winding in

And here are the idioms, all 303 of them:

double take — delayed reaction to a surprising or significant situation
 give and take — making mutual concessions, compromising
 give-and-take — a good-natured exchange of ideas or comments
 hard to take — difficult to endure
 hot take — a hasty and often deliberately provocative commentary
 it takes two to tango — blame can be laid on both parties in a conflict or situation

let nature take its course — let events happen without intervening
 on the take — accept bribes or other illegal income
 takeaway — what is or can be taken away
 takeback — something withdrawn, especially an employee benefit
 takeover — the act of seizing control
 take-up reel — the reel on which film is wound after being projected
 won't take no for an answer — insists on something

take a back seat — assume a less important role
 take a bath — suffer heavy financial loss
 take a beating/drubbing — lose badly in a competition, suffer damage
 take a bow — acknowledge applause or praise
 take a break — have a short rest
 take a breath — inhale and then exhale
 take a breather — have a short rest
 take a butcher's — (British) look at something

take a chance/risk — try something risky/chancy
 take a compliment — accept that nice things said about you are true
 take a course — enroll in a course and do the required work

take a dare — be dared to do something and attempt it
 take a decision — make a decision
 take a deep breath — pause to compose or calm oneself
 take a dim view — regard something with disapproval

take a dive — pretend to be knocked out; lose intentionally
take a dump/shit — defecate

take a fancy to — start liking something or somebody
take a firm stand — assert one's opinion; refuse to budge, insist
take a flier — assume a risk, gamble on something
take a flying fuck — what you say to tell someone to go away
take a flying leap — what you say to tell someone to go away

take a gamble — do something risky
take a gander — look at something; check it out

take a hammering — suffer a heavy defeat or severe damage
take a hand in — be involved; help with something
take a hard left or right — make a sharp turn to left or right
take a hard line — be very strict and inflexible
take a hard pass — a firm refusal or rejection; no means no
take a heavy toll — cause a serious, bad effect
take a high polish — able to become very shiny when polished
take a hike — another way of telling someone to go away
take a hint — understand something communicated indirectly
take a hit — be badly affected in some way; snort drugs; suffer heavy losses
take a hold on — make an effort to control your feelings

take a jab at — criticize, mock, or insult someone
take a joke — laugh when the joke's on you

take a leak/tinkle/whiz — pee
take a liking to — develop a liking for
take a load off — sit down and relax
take a loss — lose money
take a lot of doing — require a lot of work
take a lot of lumps — be badly beaten or hurt
take a lot out of — cause to feel physically or emotionally tired

take a nap — grab some shut-eye
take a page from someone's book — copy that person
take a pass — decline an opportunity
take a pop at — hit or criticize someone, especially in public
take a pounding — receive repeated hits or suffer a loss
take a powder — leave quickly; sneak out

take a run at — attempt to win or do something
take a running jump — used to tell someone to go away

take a seat — sit down

take a shine to — develop a liking for
take a shot/stab — try something
take a spill/tumble — to fall
take a stand — adopt a firm position, express an opinion
take a swing — try to hit something with your fist
take a swipe at — direct criticism, insults, or a fist at someone

take a turn — go for a short walk; develop in a particular way; change
take a turn for the worse/better — something becomes better or worse

take a walk — leave abruptly, used to tell someone to go away
take a whack at — try something, or aim a fist at someone
take a wife/husband — get married
take a wrong turn — go the wrong way

take account of — consider
take action — do something
take advantage — make unfair demands; make good use of
take aim — focus a camera, a gun, or a criticism
take-all — a disease of wheat, rye, barley, and oats
take-along — suitable for taking along as on a trip
take amiss — be annoyed or offended by
take an hour — use an hour, for lunch, say
take as a sign — believe an event shows something else will happen
take as a given/gospel — to accept as true
take at one's word — believe without proof
take attendance — make a record of who is present
take away from — detract from
take by storm — become very successful or popular, to conquer
take by surprise — attack, capture, or approach without warning

take care — a parting salutation; be careful or cautious
take care of — handle a situation; provide for someone's needs
take care of business — do what needs to be done
take center stage — become very important; be the center of attention
take charge — assume control or command
take-charge — have the qualities of a successful leader
take comfort in — to be soothed or calmed by something
take control — gain power over, be in charge

take delight in — enjoy very much
take delivery of — officially receive something
take dictation — to record what someone says
take-down — constructed so as to be easily dismantled
take drugs — use illegal drugs

take each day as it comes — deal with what happens and not worry
take effect — become operative; produce the intended result
take everything into consideration — think about both the good and bad
take exception — object strongly; be offended by

take fire — begin to burn
take five/ten — enjoy a five- or ten-minute break
take flight — soar; run away; begin rapid activity
take for a ride — deceive or cheat someone
take for granted — underestimate the value of; accept without question
take form — develop; begin to be visible; assume a definite form
take fright — suddenly become afraid

take great pains — try very hard
take heart — gain courage or confidence
take heed of — pay careful attention
take hold — grasp or seize; become established
take-home pay — salary remaining after deductions, as of taxes

take in good part — accept criticism without becoming angry or hurt
take in one's stride — deal with a problem in a calm way
take in tow — guide someone with support or advice
take in vain — act without success; use a name profanely
take into account — consider various factors
take into one's arms — hug, embrace
take into one's own hands — seize control
take issue — disagree with, challenge

take it — assume; understand; endure hardship
take it as read — accept something as true without proof
take it away — start playing or singing music: "Take it away, Annie!"
take it day by day — make progress in a slow and careful way
take it easy — rest or relax; be calm; avoid hard work
take it from here — start to assume responsibility
take it from me — accept that what I say is true
take it from the top — start again from the very beginning
take it in turns — alternate doing something with someone
take it on the chin — endure misfortune courageously
take it on the lam — try to escape; make a getaway
take it one day at a time — avoid worrying about the future
take it or leave it — accept or reject unconditionally
take it out in — accept repayment of a debt in goods or services
take it out of — sap one's energy
take it out on — abuse someone in venting one's own anger
take it personally — assume a remark is directed against oneself and be upset

take it upon oneself — do what needs to be done, whether or not asked to do it

take its toll — have an adverse effect

take kindly to — have a favorable opinion of

take leave of — say goodbye to

take leave of one's senses — become irrational

take legal action — start a lawsuit

take liberties — show disrespect; be overly informal

take lightly — treat casually

take lying down — submit to harsh treatment without resisting

take mercy on — treat someone kindly

take no chances — refuse to take risks

take no notice — ignore; pay no attention

take no prisoners — be ruthlessly aggressive or uncompromising

take no time at all — is able to be done instantly, immediately

take note/notice — pay attention to

take off the air — stop broadcasting

take off the market — stop from being sold

take offense — become angry or upset over some action

take office — assume an official position

take on a life of its own — become very large or hard to control

take on a new life — become more active or interesting

take on board — to accept or deal with something new

take on faith — accept as true with proof

take on the appearance of — to look like, resemble, mimic

take on the mantle of — accept the responsibilities of

take one day at a time — deal with things as they happen

take one look at — look at very briefly

take one's breath away — astonish or inspire or excite

take one's business elsewhere — switch to another supplier

take one's chances — do something even though it might fail

take one's cue from — follow someone's example or advice

take one's ease — rest or relax

take one's eyes off — stop looking

take one's hat off to — give someone praise or credit

take one's licks — be subjected to harsh criticism

take one's lumps — suffer punishment; be attacked or defeated

take one's medicine — submit to something disagreeable, as punishment

take one's mind off — stop thinking about

take one's own life — commit suicide

take one's own sweet time — do something slowly, no matter what

take one's pick — choose from several options

take one's place — assume one's usual or specified position
take one's seat — sit
take one's time — be leisurely and unhurried
take out a contract on — pay a person to kill someone
take out a patent on — obtain the legal right to make or sell a product

take part — join in an activity; be involved
take pity on — show compassion; help
take place — happen, occur
take pleasure in — enjoy
take precedence over — be more important than something else
take pride in — feel very pleased about
take priority — to be dealt with or done first

take refuge — find a safe place
take requests — sing or play the music people ask for
take revenge — harm someone who's harmed you
take root — become accepted or established

take seriously — treat as deserving attention
take shape — assume a distinct form
take shelter — find cover and protection
take ship — embark on a voyage
take shit — put up with disrespect and/or bad treatment
take shorthand — write in shorthand code from dictation
take sick — become ill, especially suddenly
take sides — support a particular faction, group, or person
take silk — reach the highest barrister's rank (British)
take some getting used to — require effort to adapt
take someone aside — talk to someone privately
take someone prisoner — capture and hold someone
take someone's call — speak to someone on the telephone
take someone's fancy — appeal to someone
take someone's life — kill someone
take someone's measure — judge someone's ability or character
take someone's name in vain — use a name disrespectfully
take someone's part — show support
take someone's pulse — measure the heart rate
take someone's side — support one person and not another
take someone's temperature — measure body temperature
take someone's word — believe without asking for proof
take something for what it's worth — judge the value of something
take something on trust — believe without checking if it's true
take something the wrong way — misunderstand and be offended
take stock — review a particular situation; count inventory
take stock in — trust; believe in; attach importance to

take the bench — to become a judge; to preside in court

take the biscuit — be especially annoying or surprising (British)

take the bit between one's teeth — get very enthusiastic and determined

take the blame — admit responsibility for some bad result

take the bull by the horns — deal with a situation head-on

take the cake — be the most remarkable or foolish of its kind

take the chill off — warm slightly

take the count — be knocked out, be defeated

take the credit — accept praise, whether or not deserved

take the day off — decide not to work on a particular day

take the easy way out — choose a solution requiring the least effort

take the edge off — reduce the intensity or effect of

take the fall — incur blame, willingly or not

take the field — begin play or prepare for war

take the Fifth — avoid incriminating oneself

take the floor — begin to dance, or speak to a group

take the good with the bad — accept all features of something

take the heat — endure heavy censure or criticism

take the helm — steer or take control

take the initiative — be the first to take action

take the law into one's own hands — punish someone illegally

take the lead — go first

take the liberty of — do something without asking permission

take the line of least resistance — do what's easiest, right or wrong

take the long view — think beyond the current situation

take the mickey — tease or ridicule someone (British)

take the offensive — attack or be aggressive

take the place of — replace; be a substitute for

take the plunge — commit to a new uncertain enterprise (get married!)

take the pressure off — reduce the amount of stress

take the reins — assume control

take the rough with the smooth — deal with all the features, good and bad

take the shape of — to resemble

take the stage — attract attention to oneself; perform

take the stand — testify at a trial

take the starch out of — cause someone to lose energy or confidence

take the time — spend enough time to do something properly

take the trouble — make additional effort to do something right

take the veil — become a nun

take the view — have an opinion

take the wheel — assume control

take the wind out of someone's sails — make them feel less confident

take the words out of someone's mouth — say what they were about to say

take time — spend time for a purpose

take time out — do something different from your usual routine
take to court — start legal action
take to drink — begin drinking lots of alcohol
take to heart — be deeply affected by something
take to one's bed — confine oneself to bed, especially if ill
take to one's heels — run away
take to pieces — separate something into parts
take to something like a duck to water — learn easily and enjoy
take to task — reprimand or criticize
take to the cleaners — cheat someone of all their money
take to the hills — to flee or vanish; to run away
take to the sky — to begin flying
take to the streets — gather in public
take turns — (of two or more people) share actions equally

take unawares — surprise by something unexpected
take under advisement — consider more carefully
take under one's wing — protect and care for
take up a collection — gather from many people or places
take up arms — begin fighting
take up for — support someone in an argument
take up residence — establish a home
take up the cudgels for — speak or fight for
take up the slack — provide or do something that is missing
take up with — become friendly with
take upon oneself — to assume as a responsibility or obligation
take wing — fly away
take with a grain of salt — be skeptical
take years off — make someone look younger

I don't know about you, but I'm out of breath!



CATTITUDE

Cats have been domesticated for nearly 12,000 years, beginning when their natural hunting skills drew them to protect our crops from mice and other pests. They traveled in ships with Vikings. They walked across our ancient manuscripts. Cats have long been a part of human history and human culture. Here are a few proverbs and idioms to prove it.

COOL CAT

A "cool cat" is someone who has the respect of their peers, a fashionable or hip person,
a person who is easygoing, casual, and laid-back.

The term originated in the early 1920s, meaning a person who performs or appreciates jazz, especially one whose speech and movement is relaxed and rhythmic. It's a slang term for a man commonly associated with jazz music.

Queen did a song called Cool Cat.

Queen is cool. Jazz is cool. Cats are even cooler.

COPYCAT

A "copycat" is someone who imitates or copies another's actions, appearance, work, or ideas. The term is usually used in a derogatory way, to mean that the copier is doing so in a shameless or derivative way. Being a copycat is also illegal if you're plagiarizing someone's copyrighted work.

The word "cat" has been an insult since the medieval period, when cats were associated with all sorts of evil and mischief. Shakespeare used "cat" in a negative sense in *All's Well That Ends Well*. Count Bertram tells his right-hand man that Captain Dumain seems increasingly sleazy: "A pox upon him for me, he's more and more a Cat."

Use of the term "copycat" arose in the 1800s, perhaps because the emergence of new manufacturing technologies led to increased concern about plagiarism and copying.

Constance Cary Harrison's 1887 quasi-memoir *Bar Harbor Days* contains the first written evidence of the term copycat that we know of. Another early example comes from Sarah Orne Jewett, in her 1896 novel *Country of Pointed Firs*, about an elderly landlady in small-town coastal Maine who

tells her friend Mrs. Fosdick, "In these days, the young folk is all copy-cats, 'fraid to death they won't be all just alike."

The word copycat was likely first applied to criminal activity in the early 1960s. In a 1961 article, *Case of the Copycat Criminal*, David Dressler explains that "when crime comes in waves, simple imitation plays a large part in the phenomenon." But the term "copycat crime" didn't really gain currency until the early 1980s. In 1982, someone replaced Tylenol powder with cyanide, killing seven. A few months later, poisonous substances were found in pharmaceuticals and food products, leading police to blame "copycats" influenced by the Tylenol Murders.

I hope plagiarism laws don't apply to recipes for chocolate fudge.

CATNAP

A "catnap" is a short, light sleep that lasts only 20 to 30 minutes, enough time to get some rest but not enough to be fully asleep.

Since the term refers to a short sleep during the day, its origin has been believed to have been started by humans observing cats. In general, they sleep off and on for short periods of time. In other words, they don't have a pattern of sleep like most humans — awake for several hours and then sleeping for eight hours. And cats don't seem to have a drowsy, waking-up phrase like we do. They nap. They wake. Two speeds.

The first literary record was apparently in 1916 in Edgar Rice Burroughs's book *The Son of Tarzan*. The passage read, "Often before had it supported his sleepy head, and now he leaned back to enjoy the forbidden pleasure of a cat nap."

A "power nap" is a much more common phrase used in recent years. I don't care for it, though. The word "power" leaves me with the impression of powering through a nap at high speed. And that's not the point of a nap, as any cat could tell you.

CAT'S CRADLE

"Cat's cradle" is a traditional string game involving the creation of various string figures between the fingers, either individually or by passing a loop of string back and forth between two or more players. The phrase is also used to describe something that is intricate, complicated, or elaborate.

The true origin of the name is debated, though the first known reference is in *The light of nature pursued* by Abraham Tucker in 1768. The type of

string, the specific figures, their order, and the names of the figures vary. Independent versions of this game have been found in indigenous cultures throughout the world, including in Africa, Eastern Asia, the Pacific Islands, Australia, the Americas, and the Arctic.

Different cultures have different names for the game, and often different names for the individual figures. In Japan, it is called "ayatori." In Korea, it is called "sil-tteu-gi." In Russia, the whole game is called simply, "the game of string," and a cat isn't mentioned. In Israel, the game is called "Knitting Grandmother." In some regions of the US, this game also is known as Jack in the Pulpit.

According to WikiHow, creating these string figures is a piece of cake once you get the hang of it, and all you need to get started is a piece of string, a steady hand, and a bit of patience. I can manage the string and a steady hand. I'm not so sure about the patience.

Perhaps the origin of the phrase is the fact that cats love to sleep in boxes. The only figure of the game that I've seen looks like a cradle, which looks like a box. And, if the box is open, it pops a cat.

The sense of the phrase as "complicated" or "elaborate" is employed in *Cat's Cradle*, a popular 1963 satirical postmodern novel, with science fiction elements, by American writer Kurt Vonnegut. This book explored and satirized issues of science, technology, the purpose of religion, and the arms race, often with morbid humor.

CAT BURGLAR

A "cat burglar" is a thief who is adept at entering a place, stealing valuables, and leaving without attracting notice. The name seems apt since cats are stealthy and quiet, approaching prey without causing alarm, pouncing without warning.

The phrase was first used to describe a particular burglar who operated in Streatham, London. The *London Daily News* ran this story in April 1907: "Known, on account of his climbing ability, as 'The Cat Burglar,' Arthur Edward Young pleaded guilty at Newington Sessions yesterday to several acts of burglary in Streatham. The only burglar's implement in his possession was a small table knife useful for pushing back window catches."

From a legal standpoint, a cat burglar is simply a thief, foremostly associated with breaking and entering, which is a legal term. The thief doesn't need to actually break something to make entry. Slipping through an open door or window is also considered breaking and entering.

Those familiar with the Batman series might remember Catwoman. She was a cat burglar who operated somewhat like Robin Hood. She stole from the more fortunate to stay alive in the seedy streets of fictional Gotham City, often sharing her bounty with the less fortunate. On occasion she aligned forces with Batman, her character walking the gray line between villain and anti-hero.

Then there are literal cat burglars: "There's a cat burglar at work in Sapperton, and it needs to be caught right meow — before Carol Ng runs out of shoes. Ng is looking for help from her neighbors and others to identify the porch pirate she's caught on camera making off with her footwear." Cats have also been known to steal underwear, socks, toys, and whatever else they can carry away.

And that must produce a lot of hot items covered in cat hair.

LOOK WHAT THE CAT DRAGGED IN

"Look what the cat dragged in" or "Look like something the cat dragged in" is a mild and usually playful insult used to announce someone's arrival and suggest that the person has a messy or otherwise disheveled physical appearance.

The origin for this expression is unknown. However, digital records seem to indicate that it began to appear in the early 1900s.

The idea behind this idiom is clear to anyone who has owned a pet cat with access to the outdoors. Cats love to hunt. They will often bring back the bounty of their hunts to the house, possibly meaning their kills to be gifts to their human owners. However, the little victims are often bloody and bedraggled and not something anyone wants on the living room carpet.

PUT THE CAT AMONG THE PIGEONS

To "put the cat among the pigeons" means to say or do something likely to cause trouble, controversy, worry, or unrest.

This British idiom originates from colonial India. A popular pastime was to put a wild cat in a pen with pigeons. Bets would be made on how many birds the cat would bring down with one paw-swipe.

Another use of the term is to "cause an enormous fight or flap, usually by revealing a controversial fact or secret," or in other words, to do something suddenly or unexpectedly which leaves people worried or angry or both.

In French, a similar meaning is expressed by "throwing a cobblestone in the pond." A pond is usually considered calm and established. So, throwing a cobblestone into it seeks a reaction from those who get splashed.

I had a friend who used this expression every time he did something upsetting, except that he called it "stirring the pot." He would gloat and look forward to the reactions from whatever group of people was involved.

I prefer my ponds peaceful, thank you very much.

PLAY CAT AND MOUSE

"Play cat and mouse," often expressed as "play a cat-and-mouse game," is an idiom that means "a contrived action involving constant pursuit, near captures, and repeated escapes." The "cat" is unable to win a victory over the "mouse," who can't defeat the cat, but is able to avoid capture. The term is derived from the hunting behavior of domestic cats, which often appear to "play" with prey by releasing it after capture. This behavior may arise from an instinctive imperative to ensure that the prey is weak enough to be killed without endangering the cat.

In colloquial usage, it can mean the advantage constantly shifts between the contestants, resulting in a stalemate, which makes the game seem never-ending. An excellent example is the television show *Tom and Jerry*. Tom, the cat, and Jerry, the mouse, never manage to destroy each other, despite that being each of their goals.

When people play cat and mouse, the interaction also involves surreptitiously or secretly pursuing or trying to trap someone. It takes patience to play cat and mouse, as it involves stealth and incremental advancements. Generally, the victim knows he is being pursued, and the aggressor takes his time in pursuing, building tension and trying to make sure that when he finally pounces, he will be victorious.

When the game is just for amusement, the "cat" trifles with or teases the "mouse." For example, "She loved to play cat and mouse with an admirer, acting by turns friendly, indifferent, and jealous."

This phrase has been around for hundreds of years, at least back to 1675 and was used in the Grimm Brothers' fairy tale *Cat and Mouse in Partnership*.

WHEN THE CAT'S AWAY, THE MICE WILL PLAY

"When the cat's away, the mice will play" is a common idiom that means

people, both adults and children, will sometimes misbehave when the person in charge is not there to watch them. In other words, you may ban the cat from the kitchen counter, but when you're not there, she'll investigate anyway.

As early as the 1300s, there were forerunners to this proverb such as, "where there is no cat, the rat is king." The phrase was used by Shakespeare in *Henry the Fifth*.

A literal translation from the Latin phrase is, "when the cat sleeps, the mouse leaves its hole, rejoicing." Similar expressions exist in many different languages. The German phrase means, "when the cat is out of the house, then the mice dance upon the table." The Spanish translation is, "when the cat is not here, the mice have a party."

When I was in high school and the teacher had to leave the room for more than five minutes, it usually meant party time!

LIKE THE CAT THAT GOT THE CREAM/CANARY

If you look like the cat that got the cream or ate the canary, you're looking very happy and proud of yourself. Perhaps even self-satisfied, often to the annoyance of others. "When he asked her on a date, she was like the cat that ate the canary."

"Like the cat that got the cream" probably arose from the idea that if a cat likes drinking milk, it will love getting a taste of rich cream. The cat may have stolen the cream, which can add both smugness and guilt to its expression. This applies to people who are hiding something from others or being coy.

"Getting the canary," of course, is the feline equivalent to getting a big prize or award.

The earliest published version of the phrase dates to the late 1800s. Several newspapers in Australia, the UK and America referred to the cat and the canary in a joke that was popular in humor columns at the time:

Father: "That cat made an awful noise in the back garden last night."

Son: "Yes, sir. I guess that since he ate the canary, he thinks he can sing."

I probably look like that cat when I've had some chocolate-peanut butter ice cream.

A CAT'S CHANCE IN HELL

"A cat's chance in hell" is no chance at all. The original phrase makes more sense: "no more chance than a cat in hell without claws." A cat is dependent upon its claws to grip and dispatch its prey, so being without these weapons would mean starvation.

The phrase is a colorful way of saying that something is highly improbable, if not impossible, like the proverbial snowball in hell.

The first known instance of this phrase is found in 1753. It was also mentioned in *A Classical Dictionary of the Vulgar Tongue* in 1788.

The British politician and pamphleteer, Sir Philip Francis, used the phrase in the following letter dated May 5, 1769. "My dear Brother, [...] We have politics enough, God knows, but as I have not the honour to be entrusted with the secrets of either party, I can give you nothing but what you will see much more elegantly set forth in the newspapers. Truth is out of the question. Each party says and believes just what suits themselves without decency or moderation, and a neutral party is detested by both. A philosopher has no more chance among them than a cat in hell. (I wish, by the by, that the person who stole my cat were in the warmest corner the devil could find for him.)"

Politics hasn't changed much, has it?

FIGHT LIKE CAT AND DOG

To "fight like cat and dog" means to fight or argue a lot, in a very forceful and angry way. It dates back at least to 1611, when used in a play performed at the Globe Theater, but I suspect it was common long before then.

Cats and dogs communicate in different ways, which can lead to signals of aggression, friendship, or territoriality being misinterpreted by the other species. Dogs instinctively chase smaller animals that flee. Most cats do flee from a dog, while others hiss, arch their backs, and fight back. After being scratched by a cat, most dogs will be fearful of cats.

According to research, dogs and cats were living together 12,000 years ago, when cats were first domesticated. The world was shifting to an agrarian-based economy and farmers needed good mousers to keep the rats and other pests out of the food storage areas. Dogs were domesticated as long as 40,000 years ago, mainly as hunting companions.

In the early stages of the cat-dog relationship, the cats were relegated to

the outbuildings while pups claimed a spot indoors, in front of the roaring fire. Then, despite retaining their "big cat" characteristics, cats decided to get in on the extra food and comfort and domesticated themselves right into people's laps and into the dogs' territory.

When first learning to share living quarters, competition over scarce scraps of food would have led to frequent fights between cats and dogs. When facing a hostile situation such as this, dogs instinctively defer to their pack leader, now a human. Cats, however, are not pack animals, but they are also prey and therefore aren't inclined to back down.

But cats and dogs get along just fine if they've been properly "civilized" by humans, or if they've been raised together.

SCAREDY-CAT

A "scaredy-cat" is a person easily frightened or timid or afraid to try something new. A similar phrase, "fraidy-cat," appeared in print by 1871, scaredy-cat by 1906. Both have been popular among children.

"Scaredy-cat" appears in print in Dorothy Parker's *The Waltz*, published in 1933, and she's usually credited with coining the term.

Domestic cats share a common ancestor, the African or Asian wildcat. These cats live in the unforgiving wild, where they're both predator and prey. Their survival depends on their ability to detect and respond quickly to potential predators and run away to safety.

Cats have heightened senses of sight, smell, hearing, and touch. This makes them extra sensitive to even the slightest movements and makes them excellent hunters. Those same senses will warn them of movement nearby, which might be benign. But such small felines can't take chances in such scenarios.

I guess it's a case of run first, talk later.

LIKE A CAT ON A HOT TIN ROOF

If you're "like a cat on a hot tin roof," you're skittish, nervous, or anxious. A similar analogy, "like a cat on a hot bake-stone," appeared in John Ray's *Proverbs* of 1678. It was later replaced by "like a cat on hot bricks," still used in the mid-twentieth century, but Tennessee Williams preferred the more picturesque "hot tin roof" for the title of his 1955 play, *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*.

One of Williams's more famous works and his personal favorite, the play won the Pulitzer Prize for Drama in 1955. It featured motifs such as social mores, greed, superficiality, mendacity, decay, sexual desire, repression, and death.

Gosh, if I had to deal with all those things, I'd be shaking my hot little paws, too.

AS NERVOUS AS A CAT IN A ROOM FULL OF ROCKING CHAIRS

This expression means being nervous or jumpy. Rockers are known to squash toes if you stand too close to them. A cat's tail would easily be squished by a rocking chair.

CAT-O'-NINE TAILS

The cat-o'-nine tails, commonly shortened to "the cat," is a type of whip. It was used notably in the Royal Navy and British Army and as a judicial punishment in Britain and some other countries.

The patterns vary, of course, but a typical cat-o'-nine tails is composed of nine lengths of tarred, braided hemp with ends lashed. The rope forming the stiff, thick handle is twisted, knotted, braided, and tarred, with a wrist loop at the top. The instrument measures a little more than three feet long overall, with the nine individual "tails" measuring approximately one and a half feet each, designed to lacerate the skin and cause intense pain.

The term first appears in 1681 in reports of a London murder, although the design is much older. It was probably so-called in reference to its "claws," which inflict parallel wounds. There are equivalent terms in many languages.

Flogging, a form of severe corporal punishment, was implemented on board vessels in the US Navy through the first half of the 1800s. It was a punishment usually reserved for the most serious offenses and usually executed by the boatswain's mate and witnessed by the entire crew. The offender was tied to the ship's rail and whipped with a cat-o'-nine tails. Congress abolished flogging on all US Navy ships in 1850.

Judicial corporal punishment was removed from the statute book in Great Britain in 1948. The cat was still being used in Australia in 1957 and is still in use in a few Commonwealth countries.

FAT CAT

A "fat cat" is a wealthy and powerful person, typically in business or politics.

The phrase dates to the 1920s, and its original meaning was purely political in origin, describing someone with deep pockets willing to financially back a political candidate.

Why "cat" and not cow or dog? According to Wikipedia, it's simply because "cat" rhymes with "fat" and such rhymes are pleasing to the ear. It's also a typical Roaring 20's kind of slang, which produced such gems as "the bee's knees," and "the ant's pants."

The term "fat cat" was apparently first used by a writer for the Baltimore Sun, Frank Kent. He wrote an essay entitled "Fat Cats and Free Rides" which was published in the *American Mercury* in June 1928.

Mr. Kent obviously liked alliteration, too.

CATS HAVE NINE LIVES

The idiom, "cats have nine lives," arose from a proverb that states: "A cat has nine lives. For three he plays, for three he strays, and for the last three he stays."

We don't know when or where this famous idiom was first documented. However, William Shakespeare used it in his play *Romeo and Juliet*, written in the late 1500s:

Tybalt: "What wouldst thou have with me?"

Mercutio: "Good king of cats, nothing but one of your nine lives."

So, we can assume the myth predates the play and likely has ancient origins.

What we do know is that the fascination with cats dates to about 12,000 years ago, when the age of agriculture began, and we invited them into our lives to protect grain stores from rodents. The Egyptians soon saw them as divine creatures with supernatural powers. The goddess Bastet's ability to change from human to cat and back again may have promoted the idea that cats have multiple lives because she kept appearing and reappearing.

Why "nine" lives? The number nine is significant in numerology, especially due to its composition of three groups of three. Nine is also symbolic in Islamic, Greek, and Roman Catholic cultures, to name a few. But in Spain, they say that cats have seven lives. Arabic and Turkish legends claim six lives. But, whatever the number, there exists the common underlying belief that cats live more than one life.

And why do people believe it? As any cat lover can tell you, cats have

lightning-fast reflexes, speedy decision-making skills, and remarkable agility. They're adept at many things, such as hunting, napping, disappearing, or strolling nonchalantly along high ledges that would daunt most humans. In one documented case, a pet cat in New York City survived a fall of 32 stories with only relatively minor injuries. This ability to survive against the odds is thanks to a cat's amazing anatomy.

Cats evolved to live in trees, and many wild feline species still do. Millions of years of springing or jumping from a height ensure they have adapted to handle it well. Their "righting reflex" enables them to twist their bodies around while falling, so that they land squarely on all four feet. Their bones and ligaments have great flexibility, which helps them to sustain minimal injury from impacts.

And, when they nap on the arm of a chair and accidentally fall off, they have the most amazing ability to pretend they meant to do just exactly that.

CAT'S EYE

"Cat's eye" can mean various things:

- a reflector set into a road to show where the lane markers are
- a marble with eyelike concentric circles
- any of several gemstones that look like the eye of a cat
- a nebula (NGC 6543) photographed by NASA's Hubble Space Telescope
- the title for several books

A CAT MAY LOOK AT A KING

"A cat may look at a king" is an English proverb. *The Oxford English Dictionary* defines it this way, "Even a person of low status has rights." *The McGraw-Hill Dictionary of American Idioms* offers this: "No one is so important that an ordinary person cannot look at him or her; everyone has the right to be curious about important people." The term also implies that no matter how high your status, you can't control everything.

The origin is unknown. The earliest known use in literary form was in 1562 in the book *The Proverbs And Epigrams Of John Heywood*. It is almost certain that the proverb existed in oral tradition long before it was written down.

A cat is a good choice for the meaning of the proverb. Cats will look—and go—just about anywhere they please. When a cat looks at a king, it probably considers the king its inferior. I can imagine it stopping for a moment, looking him in the eye, and then turning with disinterest and walking away, the tip of the tail flicking dismissively.

The best-known use of the proverb is in *Alice in Wonderland*.

—"Who are you talking to?" said the King, coming up to Alice, and looking at the Cat's head with great curiosity.

—"It's a friend of mine—a Cheshire Cat," said Alice. "Allow me to introduce it."

—"I don't like the look of it at all," said the King, "however, it may kiss my hand, if it likes."

—"I'd rather not," the Cat remarked.

—"Don't be impertinent," said the King, "and don't look at me like that!" He got behind Alice as he spoke.

—"A cat may look at a king," said Alice. "I've read that in some book, but I don't remember where."

—"Well, it must be removed," said the King very decidedly; and he called to the Queen, who was passing at the moment, "My dear! I wish you would have this cat removed!"

—"The Queen had only one way of settling all difficulties, great or small. "Off with his head!" she said without even looking round.

—"I'll fetch the executioner myself," said the King eagerly, and he hurried off.

Resentment at being looked at by cats is perhaps one of the original inspirations for the legal concept *lèse-majesté*—an offence against the dignity of a ruling head of state. The hypersensitivity of contemporary rulers to contradiction and criticism has become a feature of our lives, but it is not new.

It's not new for cats, either. Humans have often committed *lèse-majesté* against the King of the Jungle. And though the domestic cat is small, his sense of his royal status is just as large as that of the lion.

BELLING THE CAT

"Belling the cat" is a way of describing a great idea that's impossible to carry out.

In a famous story, *The Mice in Council*, a group of mice held a meeting to figure out how to free themselves from the threats of a cat. One mouse proposed that if they could put a bell around the cat's neck, they would be warned of its approach. All the mice agreed that this was a good plan but not one would volunteer to do the belling. They talked at length about the plan but were unwilling to attempt carrying it out when faced with the real risks.

The story teaches the necessity of evaluating a plan on not only how desirable the outcome would be but also how it can be executed. The plan

must be achievable, or it is useless.

One of the earliest known versions of the story, in 1200, appears as a parable critical of the clergy. It continued to be published through the Middle Ages, often referring to politics. One author concludes with the scornful comment that laws are of no effect without the means of adequately enforcing them and that such parliamentary assemblies as he describes are like the proverbial mountain in labor that gives birth to a mouse.

If cats could read, I'm sure they had a good laugh over this story.

CURIOSITY KILLED THE CAT

"Curiosity killed the cat" is a proverb used to warn against unnecessary investigation or overstepping boundaries, usually by asking unwanted questions. It implies that being curious or downright nosy can sometimes lead to danger or misfortune. In other words, "Mind your own business!"

The original expression was "care killed the cat," where "care" meant worry or sorrow. It was first recorded in 1598 in Ben Jonson's play *Every Man in His Humour*. Shakespeare used a similar quote in his circa 1599 play, *Much Ado About Nothing*. This form was still in use in 1898, when it was defined in *Brewer's Dictionary of Phrase and Fable*: "Care killed the Cat. It is said that a cat has nine lives, but care would wear them all out."

The current expression with "curiosity" is much newer, but the origin is unknown. It is found in an Irish newspaper from 1868: "They say curiosity killed a cat once." An early printed reference is in James Allan Mair's 1873 compendium *A handbook of proverbs: English, Scottish, Irish, American, Shakespearean, and scriptural; and family mottoes*, where it is listed as an Irish proverb.

A variation of the idiom is followed by the rejoinder "but satisfaction brought it back." On 23 December 1912, the earliest known printed reference to this variation of the proverb is found in *The Titusville Herald*, a Pennsylvania newspaper.

Humans and cats are naturally inquisitive creatures. One could argue that curiosity is the catalyst behind revolutionary discoveries and inventions. On the other hand, though, there's the tale about evolution.

Two cavemen hear a rustling in the bush. One caveman's curiosity gets the best of him, and he decides to investigate. The other refuses. Upon inspecting the bush, the curious caveman is killed by some ferocious creature.

I guess satisfaction isn't always worth the risk.

LIKE HERDING CATS

"Like herding cats" is a relatively new idiom that began circa the 1980s. It was celebrated in a popular TV commercial titled "Cat Herding," which featured a group of cowboys on horseback attempting to herd a large group of cats. I saw that ad and it was hilarious.

The idiom can be used to highlight that organizing large groups of people cannot usually be done without requiring a great deal of effort and patience.

Many people attribute the idiom to a well-known quote by IT professional Dave Platt, who famously said, "Managing senior programmers is like herding cats," since programmers are so independent. I've also heard people use it about engineers.

It's already difficult or impossible to get one cat to do what you want. Imagine trying to organize several cats!

THE CAT IN GLOVES CATCHES NO MICE

If you're a cat wearing gloves, you're too cautious. Some aggressiveness is required to get things done. If a cat wears protective gloves and thus blunts his claws, he will not be able to nab even one mouse.

There is no record of the proverb's first use in English. A similar French proverb, which translates literally to "a gloved cat will never mouse well," has been used since the 1300s.

The best advice would be "don't pussyfoot around!"

PUSSYFOOT

To "pussyfoot" around is to move stealthily or refrain from committing oneself. It arises from observing the light and careful tread of cats.

The word dates to circa 1893. It was also used as a noun around 1911, to mean "a detective." "Pussyfoot" was the nickname of US government Indian Affairs agent W.E. Johnson (1862-1945), in charge of suppressing liquor traffic on Indian reservations in Oklahoma, who was noted for his stealthy tactics.

CAT'S PAW

The term, "cat's paw," is very old and has several meanings.

- a person used by someone else as a tool
- a metal hand tool used for extracting nails
- a light ripple, in irregular patches, on a calm sea
- a loop formed in a line or rope for attaching a hook
- in bookbinding, the colored mark made on the edges of a book

Using someone as a cat's paw is derived from Jean de La Fontaine's fable *The Monkey and the Cat*, which appeared in the second collection of his Fables in 1679. The story began to appear in collections of Aesop's Fables from the 1600s.

In the fable, a monkey persuades a cat to retrieve chestnuts from the embers of a fire for the two to share, but the monkey quickly eats each chestnut as it is retrieved, and the cat burns its paw in the process. There are popular idioms derived from it in both English and French with the general meaning of being the dupe of another. These have often been employed in political contexts.

As a standard tool in carpentry, the cat's paw has a sharp V-shaped tip on one or both ends, which is slid under the nail head if it protrudes from the wood. If not, it's driven into the wood by a hammer to capture the nail head. Essentially, it is a smaller, more ergonomic, purpose-designed crowbar (also called a nail-puller or pry bar).

Prior to the Industrial Revolution, nails were individually hand-made by blacksmiths. As a result, they were generally far more valuable than the wood they were driven into. Nail pullers were designed to preserve the condition of the nail for reuse, resulting in a slide hammer type design, still in specialty use today. As old growth wood has become much more valuable than the nails that hold it in place, there has been a move toward designs that take out nails with less damage to the wood.

Cats are usually wily, clever, resourceful, and sophisticated. The "cat's paw" story is an exception to the norm, and not one that any self-respecting cat would want on his resumé.

ALLEY CAT

A derogatory term for a person (typically a woman) considered immoral or promiscuous, especially a prostitute. The term "tom cat" is more common when referring to a man.

HAVE KITTENS

To "have kittens" is to become very nervous or frantic about something.

For anyone to confess "nearly had kittens" is a dramatic way of admitting how anxious and scared he or she had been. The term is just a metaphor, and no one would dream of taking it literally. Yet the phrase has some history.

In medieval times, people believed in witches and the mysterious influence of cats, which extended even to their sex lives. A Scottish superstition may be directly responsible for the phrase. This assumed that a woman could conceive kittens, if she unknowingly ate any food on which cats had ejected their semen.

A woman, suffering agonizing pain in pregnancy, was assured by witches that the cause was not the growing child but kittens inside her womb, and that only a magical potion could destroy the brood and alleviate her suffering. As late as 1654, a woman tried in a Scottish court for attempting to procure an abortion, pleaded in excuse that she had done so because she had "cats in her bellie."

ALL CATS ARE GRAY IN THE DARK

The proverb "all cats are grey in the dark" suggests that beauty is unimportant. Beneath outward appearances people are all much alike. As Plutarch, a Greek biographer who lived in the first century CE, wrote, "When the candles are out all women are fair."

The phrase has appeared in at least two books of proverbs published in the 1500s and is found in various forms in several languages.

The most popular story says that Benjamin Franklin used it in 1745 in a letter he wrote to a young man, recommending that he have affairs with older women rather than marry. He praised older women for their ability to talk intelligently in conversation and for their sexual experience. A bonus is the fact that they won't get pregnant. Franklin also thought it was better to make an old woman happy than a young one miserable.

An interesting sidelight: A brewer called *Fat Orange Cat Brew Co.* has created a beer known as "All Cats Are Gray in The Dark." One reviewer reports that it smells like "roasted oats, cocoa, and slight orange," and tastes like "toasted oats, coffee, cocoa, vanilla, and orange at the finish." He says much more, which only an expert would understand, and finishes with, "Overall, this was a very interesting beer, different from any I have had before. I would describe it as a cross between an IPA and a stout."

Okay, if you say so. To me, beer tastes like beer, and I like it. Do I need to know more?

QUICK BITES

CAT'S-CLAW—a popular herbal supplement derived from a tropical vine.

CAT'S-EAR—a perennial plant that looks like a dandelion but has longer legs.

CATFIGHT—an intense fight or argument between two women.

HELLCAT—a spiteful, violent woman, witch, or ill-tempered woman (1612).

IN A CAT'S EYE, ALL THINGS BELONG TO CATS—cats rule the world and know it.



DOWN & DIRTY

The phrase “down and dirty” became popular around the mid-1900s, and its use spread rapidly, often to describe the actions of shady politicians and to refer to a wide range of sexual practices which had recently become the subject of films, books, and other media. However, the phrase soon acquired broader shades of meaning.

- direct and explicit, frank, “tell it like it is”
- unvarnished truth, the real deal, the true story
- solutions to problems done crudely and carelessly: a sloppy paint job
- fierce, often unscrupulous competition: down and dirty campaigning
- earthy, sexually wild and uncontrolled
- seedy: a down and dirty neighborhood
- crudely basic and practical: down and dirty details
- do or say harsh and unpleasant things
- be vicious or ruthless, be deceitful

The phrase is popular because something which is down and dirty can be shocking but often enjoyable. If you like the truth, “down and dirty” can sometimes be a breath of fresh air. It can also be funny in a macabre sort of way. The film entitled *Down and Dirty*, which came out in 1976, was a black comedy about a depraved family whose interests include adultery, murder, revenge, and incest. I'd say that was pretty down and dirty!

We don't know where the phrase originated. Theories abound, of course. It may have come from the film *Dirty Dancing*, which explored the nature of prohibited sexual attraction through the medium of dance. It might have arisen from the card game, poker, where a bad card can mess up an otherwise positive hand, thus “dirtying” it.

Yet another possible source can be found in sports. Sports enthusiasts aren't the ones chasing the ball, leaping, or tackling. It is the players themselves, in this interpretation of the expression, who actually get “down and dirty.”

I feel like getting down and dirty today. But I don't know what form it will take. Should I yell at a politician, look at some pornography online, or deal with that mess in the kitchen?

DIRT

“Dirt” is earth or soil — it's the fine rock that makes up the dry surfaces of our planet. Gardeners spend a lot of time digging in the dirt, planting seeds,

and pulling up weeds. The word also means anything unclean.

Dirt, of course, is an old word. In Middle English (c.1300), it was *drit* or *dryt*, meaning excrement, dung, feces, any foul or filthy substance, also mud and earth, and was used abusively of persons. Using it to mean gossip was first attested in 1926, in one of Ernest Hemingway's novels.

"Dirt" used as an adjective, meaning "made of loose earth," is found by 1860. The dirt-bike is attested by 1970; dirt-cheap by 1766; dirt-poor by 1906; dirt road by 1835. Pay-dirt, which was California miners' slang, was attested by 1857.

Dictionary definitions:

- earth (a mound of dirt, a dirt road)
- loose or packed soil or sand
- a filthy or soiling substance, such as mud, dust, or grime
- something worthless (archaic)
- a contemptible person (she treated me like dirt)
- an abject or filthy state (squalor, living in dirt)
- corruption, chicanery (the dirt in any government)
- licentiousness of language or theme
- scandalous or malicious gossip
- embarrassing or incriminating information (digging up dirt on political rivals)

Common types of dirt include:

- Soil: the mix of clay, sand, and humus which lies on top of bedrock
- Debris: scattered pieces of waste or remains
- Dust: a general powder of organic or mineral matter
- Filth: foul matter such as excrement
- Grime: a black, ingrained dust such as soot

I get the impression that humans weren't that fussed about dirt until the last few hundred years. The first legal creation of the dustbin was in the UK's *Public Health Act* in 1875, which required households to place their refuse into a container that could be moved so that it could be carted away.

We are now more concerned with hygiene, sometimes to our disadvantage. Forbidding little Johnny to play in the dirt is hypothesized to be the cause of the epidemic of allergies such as asthma. The human immune system requires activation and exercise to function properly and exposure to dirt may achieve this. Besides, little Johnny and little Janie enjoy making mud pies. On the opposite end of the scale are those people and animals who sometimes eat dirt. This is thought to be caused by a mineral deficiency.

Dirt can be a matter of opinion. Our notion of cleanliness has a marked

cultural aspect. For instance, the famous baths of ancient Rome were seen as progress for personal hygiene, but later scorned by Christians who rejected all things Roman.

Having grown up on a farm, I would prefer to think of dirt, or soil, as the root of our existence, supporting our feet and our farms. It's right up there with sunshine, rain, and fresh breezes. And then there's the *Nitty Gritty Dirt Band*, an American country rock band formed in 1966.

Computer keyboards are considered especially dirty as they contain on average 70 times more microbes than a lavatory seat. I really don't want to think about that.

DIRTY

"Dirty" means to be covered or marked with an unclean substance. Synonyms: grimy, soiled, filthy, foul, nasty, squalid, and unclean. The word is also used for emphasis, as in "a dirty great slab of stone."

Again, this is an old word and much used, since many people have regarded as dirty anything that is not us. And, sometimes, even us. The first known use dates to the early 1400s, arising from *dritty*, meaning feculent or muddy.

Here's a dirty great long list of ways the word dirty is used:

- not clean or pure
- likely to befoul with a soiling substance: dirty jobs
- contaminated with infecting organisms: dirty wounds
- containing impurities: dirty coal
- morally unclean, indecent, vulgar: dirty jokes, dirty movies
- dishonorable: a dirty trick, dirty someone's reputation
- unsportsmanlike: dirty players
- acquired by illegal means: dirty money
- disagreeable or distasteful, but usually necessary: dirty work
- abominable, hateful: war is a dirty business
- highly regrettable: a dirty shame
- likely to cause scandal: dirty secrets
- foggy, stormy: dirty weather
- a dull color: dirty blond
- in music, a husky, rasping, or raw tonal quality: dirty trumpet tones
- conveying ill-natured resentment: gave him a dirty look
- superannuated lecher: dirty old man
- deceptive, underhanded: fight dirty

Many years ago, when I participated in community theater, we put on a melodrama called *Dirty Work at the Crossroads or Tempted Tried and True*.

It's a funny, tear-jerking story of Nellie Lovelace, an innocent country girl, and Munro, the evil villain. Munro pursues Nellie and tears her from the arms of her dying mother (whom he has poisoned). Then he drives Nellie's sweetheart, Adam Oakhart, to drink and commits various other foul deeds before he is defeated. I seem to remember Munro tying Nellie to a railroad track, but maybe I'm thinking of some other play containing foul dirty work.

PAY DIRT

"Pay dirt" is gravel or earth that contains valuable minerals such as gold or oil. This North American term dates from 1850s mining, and the California Gold Rush. When miners found an area rich with gold ore, they would say they'd hit pay dirt.

Today, we're more likely to use the term informally to mean "reward, profit, or success," especially after a lot of effort. For example, "The gig pays three hundred bucks a week—looks like I just hit pay dirt."

Here's a quote from a book called *Mining in the Pacific States of North America*, published in 1861. "It is customary to speak of 'the golden sands of California;' but a person who believes that gold is found in pure sand, would be far wrong. Usually, the pay-dirt is a very stiff clay, full of large gravel and stones. The depth of this pay-dirt varies. In a gully where the water is not more than five feet wide in the heaviest rain, the pay dirt will not usually be more than a foot deep."

Mining sounds like hard work. I'd prefer to win a lottery.

DIRTY ROTTEN TRICK

A "dirty rotten trick" is any malicious, contemptible, or underhanded machination.

In politics, the phrase refers to unethical or illegal campaign practices or pranks intended to disrupt or sabotage the campaigns of opposing candidates. In business, it refers to any unethical practices carried out against rival countries or corporations for espionage or commercial purposes.

DIRTY WORK

To do someone's "dirty work" means to do a task for them that is dishonest or unpleasant or illegal and which they do not want to do themselves. For example, "He always sends his assistant to do his dirty work."

Anybody out there want to come and clean my bathroom?

WASH YOUR DIRTY LAUNDRY IN PUBLIC

"Washing your dirty laundry in public" means that you're exposing private matters to public view, especially unsavory secrets. It was first recorded in English in 1867. In America, an often-used variant is, "air your dirty washing in public."

People, especially couples, who argue in front of others or involve others in their personal problems and crises, are said to be washing their dirty laundry in public, thus making public things that are best left private.

In the past, many people didn't have the space or facilities to dry washing privately, so it was hung outside on a clothesline, in full view. Keeping one's personal linen (especially underwear) away from prying eyes was the privilege of the more affluent people.

Various sources say that Napoleon Bonaparte used 'wash your dirty laundry in public' on his return from Elba in 1815. That may be true, but it had been used prior to that date.

An American writer, Thomas Green Fessenden, used it his book *Pills, Poetical, Political, and Philosophical*, which was published in 1809.

By 1895, the proverb was well enough known for Oscar Wilde to make a joke out of it. In *The Importance of Being Earnest*, he has his character Algernon Moncrieff say, "The amount of women in London who flirt with their own husbands is perfectly scandalous. It looks so bad. It is simply washing one's clean linen in public."

DIRTY DOG

A "dirty dog" is a person deemed to be despicable, contemptible, or simply unpleasant. Synonyms include: bum, crumb, lowlife, rat, rotter, skunk, so-and-so, and stinker. It could also be a dog that's been rolling happily in rotten fish.

GET YOUR HANDS DIRTY

To "get your hands dirty" means, figuratively, to become involved in all aspects of a job, including routine, practical, and the more unpleasant tasks. We usually apply it to situations where we're applauding someone's commitment to doing something. But it's also applied to special situations where someone is up to no good and doing nasty things that are usually

illegal.

Literally, of course, it describes doing manual labor that could cause your hands to become dirty, like gardening or repairing a car.

We don't know the origin of the phrase, but it became common around the mid-1800s.

I spend so much time on my supposedly filthy computer keyboard that my hands are always supposedly dirty.

QUICK AND DIRTY

The expression "quick and dirty" refers to completing a task rapidly rather than making it high quality. Usually, solutions that are quick and dirty serve a temporary purpose rather than long term. In other words, they are expedient and effective but not without flaws or unwanted side effects.

For example, "I accidentally spilled some paint on my carpet last week. I'm not sure how to clean it, so for now my quick and dirty solution is to cover it up with a rug."

DIRTY POOL

We use the phrase 'dirty pool' to mean dishonest, unfair, or unsportsmanlike conduct, taking an unfair advantage by being devious. I might use it against another player when playing poker, for example. "The only reason you won the money was because you had an ace hidden up your sleeve! That's dirty pool!" It's also often used in politics to mean smearing an opponent's reputation or, indeed, any underhanded ploy to make the opposing party look stupid.

The word 'dirty,' of course, means unclean or morally despicable. In the mid-1700s, the word began to be used in the sense of "earned by dishonest means" and gave rise to the phrase 'dirty money.' By the early 1900s, "to do the dirty" meant to play an underhanded trick.

There are several meanings for 'pool':

- a small body of standing water
- an abbreviation for swimming pool (1901)
- a common interest or fund (finance); football pool (1933)
- sharing, as in a carpool
- common reservoir of resources (1917); typist pool (1928)
- the game of pool

Pool is a game that has been with us since the late 1800s or early 1900s, having evolved from billiards. It's played with cues and balls on a rectangular, felted table with raised, cushioned edges. The name was originally (1690s) used for a card game played for collective stakes, or a pool of money. And pool came from French *poule*, meaning "stakes, booty, plunder," and from the earlier Old French *poille*, meaning "hen, young fowl."

It may be that the original notion is from *jeu de la poule*, supposedly a game in which people threw things at a chicken and the player who hit it, won it, which speaks volumes about life in the Middle Ages. The notion behind the word, then, is "playing for money."

Pool shark is from 1898, but the phrase 'dirty pool' of politics, is recorded from 1871 and was in use in the early 1900s.

There are many synonyms for dirty pool, which may indicate that human beings haven't evolved as much as we like to think. Examples: trickery, fraud, chicanery, cheating, deceit, crookedness, duplicity, deviousness, underhandedness, legerdemain, misconduct, perfidiousness, shadiness, shiftiness, sneakiness, unscrupulousness, double-dealing, dirty work, dirty game, dirty politics, dirty tricks, foul play, smoke and mirrors.

Look at all those synonyms! There's obviously a lot of dirty pool in the world.



ODDBALLS ONE

Oddballs, whether they are people or objects, are unusual, strange, and possibly peculiar. They are also, apparently, some kind of underwear, the title of at least one movie, and at least one game.

But the only odd thing about the following words, and those in Oddballs Two, is that they are almost always single words rather than phrases or idioms or proverbs.

86 EIGHTY-SIX 86

"Eighty-six" is a slang term which now means "to throw out," get rid of," or "refuse service to."

Originally, so it is said, the term comes from 1930s soda-counter slang meaning that an item was sold out, the theory being that it's rhyming slang for "nix."

But how does "We don't have any" become "Get rid of what we have"?

In the 1950s, people began using the word as a verb. The initial meaning was "to refuse to serve a customer," and later took on the slightly extended meaning of "to get rid of; to throw out." The word was especially used in reference to refusing further bar service to inebriates. From the *Independent* (Long Beach, CA), 12 Sept 1960, "I have all I can handle eighty-sixing the drunks."

According to *Cassell's Dictionary of Slang*, the meaning expanded during the 1970s to also mean "to kill, to murder; to execute judicially."

There are many theories about the term, which apparently originated in the 1920s or 1930s. The theories include the following.

Saloonkeepers in bygone days, seeing a patron become intoxicated from drinking hard liquor, sometimes switched his drinks to 86-proof liquor. Until the 1980s, whiskey came in 100 or 86 proof. But this doesn't make a lot of sense, since a cowboy drunk on 86 proof whiskey would present as much of a problem as one wasted on 100 proof hooch. Besides, the term '86' has never carried the meaning of "To cheat a consumer by secretly substituting inferior goods for what has been bargained for."

It's perhaps possible that the term "86" originated in Las Vegas. A comedian performing there said that it means to show people out of one's business

establishment by taking them 8 miles out of town and planting them 6 feet under.

A much more interesting theory for the source comes from the bar *Chumley's* at 86 Bedford Street in the West Village of Lower Manhattan. This is suggested by author Jef Klein, in *The History and Stories of the Best Bars of New York*. To survive Prohibition, many speakeasies had the police on what might be called a payroll so that they could be warned of a raid. Klein's book claims that the police would call Chumley's bar before making a raid and tell the bartender to "86" his customers, meaning that they should exit the 86 Bedford Street door, while the police would come to the Pamela Court entrance.

According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, the first verifiable use of 86 in the 'refuse service to' sense dates to a 1944 book about John Barrymore, a movie star of the 1920s famous for his acting and infamous for his drinking: "There was a bar in the Belasco building ... but Barrymore was known in that cubby as an 'eighty-six.' An 'eighty-six,' in the patois of western dispensers, means: 'Don't serve him.'"

Other theories suggest that specific restaurants or bars were legally barred from hosting more than 85 patrons on their premises at any one time, thus the 86th person to appear would be denied service. Or that a particular legal code (such as one governing liquor laws) contained an Article 86 that had something to do with refusing service.

Some try to tie the origin of the term to Article 86 of the Uniform Code of Military Justice, the AWOL (absent without leave) section of that code that makes it a crime for someone serving in the military to fail to go to his appointed place of duty at the time prescribed, to leave his place of duty, or to be absent from his unit without authority. But in the military, you never hear of someone's having gone 86; you instead hear, "He went AWOL."

Another theory has to do with generating electricity. The wiring diagrams for Petersburg Generating Station, for example, sets all lock-out relays to be named "86" in its documentation, and operators describe a trip or lock-out event (for example, pump motor shutdown due to low voltage) as "86'd." However, according to Snopes, the list of Standard Device Numbers does not date to the 1930s.

The most widely accepted theory of the term's origin states it derives from a code supposedly used in some restaurants in the 1930s, wherein 86 was a shortform among restaurant workers for 'We're all out of it.' Snippets of said restaurant code were published in newsman Walter Winchell's column *On Broadway* in 1933, where it was presented as part of a "glossary of soda-fountain lingo." In this, the code 13 meant that a boss was around, 81 was a

glass of water, and 86 meant "all out of it."

We still don't know how "We don't have any" became "Get rid of what we have." But one hypothesis for the term's origin appears to be accurate. 86 is rhyming slang for nix. Nix carries a clear meaning of "say no to, turn down, forbid," which is the primary meaning ascribed to 86.

The term has been very popular in literature, the music world, and on stage and screen. For example, the 1995 song "86" by Green Day is about them being rejected from their punk rock community when they started achieving commercial success. And, on the screen, we have Agent 86 in the 1960s TV show *Get Smart*. The 1989 novel *Eighty-sixed* by David B. Feinberg refers to "the gay community wiped out by AIDS."

And tell me again, what part of "no" don't you understand?

AHHH-CHOO!

When someone sneezes, we often use the word "achoo" to describe the sound.

This is an example of onomatopoeia; the word imitates the sound of sneezing. The first syllable mimics the quick intake of breath, while the second corresponds with the tone of the convulsive expulsion of air through the nose and mouth.

Sneezing (or sternutation) is your body's way of removing irritants from your nose or throat. It is a powerful, involuntary expulsion of air. While this symptom can be annoying, it's not usually the result of any serious health problem. A sneeze also can be provoked by being outside in the sunlight or from smelling a strong odor.

The eyes closing during a sneeze is probably just an involuntary reaction. Sneezing will cause many muscles in your body to react. For example, people with stress incontinence experience urine leakages when they sneeze — the result of those muscles tensing and releasing involuntarily.

Don't stifle a sneeze, though. That can cause a host of undesirable symptoms, including the rupture of blood vessels in the brain.

If sneezing is a physical reflex action, saying "bless you!" after someone sneezes is a mental reflex action. It's a common response and, because we learn it right from childhood, it becomes automatic, meant to adhere to the rules of good manners and politeness.

The tradition of blessing someone after a sneeze is so old that even the

Roman scholar Pliny the Elder wrote about it in *Natural History* (77 CE) and puzzled over its origins. There are several theories about that, of course.

It was once believed that the soul temporarily left the body during a sneeze, leaving it vulnerable to the clutches of Satan. The blessing was intended to keep the devil away from the sneezer's soul. According to another theory, a person sneezed to expel evil spirits from their body, and the blessing was given to prevent them from going right back in. There was also the misconception that the heart momentarily stops during a sneeze (it doesn't), and that saying "bless you" was a way of welcoming the person back to life.

Alternative terms are:

- salud (Spanish): good health
- gesundheit (German): good health
- go away, kitten (Serbian): mostly used with children, as a sneeze supposedly sounds like a cat's cough. To be sure of that, we could watch cat videos. All the videos, right? And the kitten ones twice.

APRON

"Apron" most commonly means a piece of clothing worn over other clothes to keep them clean when doing a dirty or messy job, especially cooking. However, there are several other meanings, according to the *Merriam-Webster Dictionary*. I was familiar with the first two, but not the others.

- the part of an airport where aircraft are turned around or goods are put onto them
- the part of a stage in a theater that is in front of the curtain
- the section of a boxing ring canvas floor that extends outside the ring ropes
- an upward or downward vertical extension of a bathroom fixture (such as a sink or tub)
- an endless belt for carrying material
- an extensive fan-shaped deposit of detritus
- the area along the waterfront edge of a pier or wharf
- a shield (as of concrete or gravel) to protect against erosion (as of a waterway) by water
- the lower member under the sill of the interior casing of a window

In medieval French, a diminutive form of *nape*, meaning "tablecloth," was *naperon*, which referred to a small cloth placed over a more elegant tablecloth to protect it from stains (what we would call a place mat or a napkin). This word appears in 1300s English as *napron* and is also described as a protective cloth, but one that was placed over clothing rather than on a table. Because in speech it is often difficult to tell where word boundaries fall, "a napron" was incorrectly understood to be "an apron." The new form *apron* effectively replaced *napron* by the 1600s. We still use

the French *nape* however, in the form of "napery" which means "household linen, especially tablecloths and napkins."

Aprons are everywhere. Often worn as protection of clothes and skin from stains and marks, and heat, they are also worn for many other purposes, including decoration, ceremonial garb, as part of a uniform, to hold extra tools, and as a fashion statement.

There are many different apron forms depending on the purpose. A basic distinction is between waist aprons, which cover the body from the waist down, and bib aprons, which also cover the upper part of the body. A carpenter's apron has pockets or other attachments to hold tools. An apron is usually held in place by two ribbon-like strips of cloth that are tied at the back. Some modern-day aprons have humorous expressions, designs, or corporate logos.

One form of apron is the pinafore, which is worn by girls and women as a decorative garment or as a protective apron. A tabard (cobbler apron in US English) is a type of apron that covers both the front and back of the body. It is used in many occupations, like bakeries, hospitals, and large retail stores. The original cobbler's apron was typically made of leather.

The term apron also refers to an item of clerical clothing, now largely obsolete, worn by Anglican bishops and archdeacons. The clerical apron resembles a short cassock reaching just above the knee, and is colored black for archdeacons and purple for bishops. It is symbolic of the mobility of bishops and archdeacons, who at one time would ride horses to visit various parts of a diocese or archdeaconry.

During the Middle Ages, aprons were worn by blacksmiths, armor and weapon makers, gardeners, carvers, furniture makers, leather smiths, cobblers, tailors, jewelers, metal forgers, fishmongers, clock makers, homemakers, tradesmen, artisans, and masons. Tradesmen in general were called "apron men," as aprons were so common that distinguishing styles emerged among the various trades. For example, English barbers were known as "checkered apron men." Cobblers wore black to protect garments from the black wax used on shoes. Butchers wore blue stripes. Butlers wore green aprons. Blue was worn by weavers, spinners, and gardeners. Stonemasons wore white aprons as protection against the dust of their trade, and even in the twenty-first century, aprons survive as part of Masonic ceremonial attire.

Even the ancient gods wore aprons. The snake goddess figurines excavated in Crete depicted how Minoan women may have dressed in 1600 BCE: a tight bodice, bare breasts, and an embroidered or woven apron covering a long dress. Monuments and wall paintings in Ancient Egypt depict a

triangular-shaped apron with the point upward when the wearer is taking part in some kind of ceremony of initiation. In China and Central America, the ancient gods are consistently sculpted wearing aprons.

Aprons became a fashion statement in the 1500s, when women started adorning them with expensive lace and embroidery. Aprons were also a way of indicating the difference in status between the employer and the employee, and the uniform of the staff was strictly regulated. For example, a housemaid might wear a print dress during the day and then change into a black dress and dress apron for the evening service.

Aprons became plain during the Great Depression. Since fabric was scarce, women would make aprons out of flour and animal-feed sacks. Pinafore aprons, or "pinnies" as they were affectionately called, began to gain popularity. Dorothy famously wore a blue and white gingham pinafore in *The Wizard of Oz*.

Many people have fond memories of Grandma's apron. Her apron, so it is said, was used to carry any number of things: eggs, apples, vegetables from the garden, kindling wood. It was also useful for drying children's tears, hiding shy kids, and sometimes even used for cleaning out dirty ears. When unexpected company drove up the road, it was surprising how much furniture that old apron could dust in a matter of seconds.

We've all heard the comment, "He's tied to his mother's apron strings" to indicate that some adult son is still controlled by his mother. Sometimes, it's his wife's apron strings.

All I can say is that aprons are very useful items. I don't own even one, however; I like to keep laundry to a bare minimum.

CHAMBER POT

In many homes, chamber pots served an important purpose in the days before indoor plumbing. Instead of trekking out to the outhouse or privy in the dark, people would keep a chamber pot under the bed and use it when they had to relieve themselves at night. The first known use of the phrase was in 1540.

"Chamber" is an older term for bedroom. The chamber pot has various names, including: Jordan, jerry, potty, thunder pot, thunder mug, slop-jar, slop-pail, honey bucket, and best of all, Texas teacup. It was also known in polite circles as a chamber utensil or bedroom ware. "Potty" no doubt gave rise to the phrase "potty mouth," meaning someone who uses a lot of rude language.

Thunder mugs were used in ancient Greece at least since the 6th century BCE and were known under different names there, too. In Egypt, one of the earliest examples found dates from 1300 BCE. In China, a wealthy salt merchant in Yangzhou made a name for himself when he commissioned a chamber pot made of gold which was so tall that he had to climb a ladder to use it. One wonders how he managed if he was in a hurry.

Even up to the 1700 and 1800s, the open use of the chamber pot was both accepted and inevitable. Travelers in coaches, judges on the bench, and captains on board ship all used chamber pots. According to *Lives and Legacies*, there was no outhouse at George Washington's Ferry Farm nor at many other historical homes of the era.

In France, chamber pots were called *bourdaloue*, in honor of Louis Bourdaloue (1632-1704), a popular Jesuit priest. He attracted such large congregations that to make sure of a seat at the sermon, worshippers had to arrive long before the service began. Bourdaloue was also renowned for his long sermons which made it difficult for people who needed to empty their bladders. To solve this awkward situation, women carried 'potties' hidden in their large muffs. Of a slender oblong shape, they could slip them inconspicuously under their voluminous skirts though the ensuing sound could give the game away.

The basic design of a chamber pot involves a vessel deep enough to hold urine without splashing. It might be kept in a chair (called a close stool) with a special hinged seat. It might be stored in a cabinet with doors to hide it; this sort of nightstand was known as a commode; hence the latter word came to mean "toilet" as well. For homes without such furniture, the chamber pot was stored under the bed. Many had a lid to contain the contents and any associated odors.

Through the years chamber pots have been made of almost every type of material that would hold liquid. The wealthy had pots made of pewter, copper, silver, and sometimes even gold. But the most common materials were tin, lead, and various kinds of pottery.

In the mid 1600s, several Staffordshire potteries began to mass produce chamber pots, exporting many to the colonies. During the Victorian era, ceramic chamber pots decorated in colorful floral designs or beautiful scenes were very popular. These were often part of a matching set of wash bowl, hot water jug, soap dish, shaving jug, and chamber pot.

Victorians also liked to design amusing chamber pots, and some contained the faces of politicians of the day, such as Gladstone and Disraeli. What a great way of pissing on somebody!

It may have been fun peeing on a politician, but in the morning, you had to dispose of the contents of chamber pots. They were dumped in an outhouse, if there was one, or a stream, or on a compost or dung heap, and then scrubbed before being replaced in the bedrooms. In very early days, they were also dumped out of windows, into the street. Look out below!

And here is another possible French connection to the chamber pot. "Gardyloo" was a word used in Edinburgh as a warning cry before throwing slops from the windows into the streets. The word may have come from the French phrase *garde à l'eau!* (attention to the water!) or it could have been a mocking imitation of that language. The word has been in use since the late 1700s. No, it has nothing to do with the fact that some speakers of British English refer to the toilet as a "loo." The origin of loo to mean toilet is unknown, and the word did not come into common use until well over a century after gardyloo.

Modern bedpans take the place of chamber pots in medical settings and care homes. But chamber pots continue in use in areas lacking indoor plumbing. I checked online and found that both Walmart and Amazon have chamber pots in stock.

On the northern homestead where I grew up, we used chamber pots at night and if someone was ill. The pots were simple, white, enameled metal with handles. Because we had no indoor plumbing, we used an outdoor double-seater wooden outhouse, also known as a "biffy," which worked perfectly well most of the time. But, in the depths of winter, it was too much hassle to put on clothes, including boots and parka and go out to the biffy in minus-40 (or more) Fahrenheit. There's nothing like putting your bare, warm bum on a frosty wooden seat to wake you up!

CRAPSHOOT

"Crapshoot" is used to describe anything unpredictable, risky, or problematical. The word comes from craps, a game in which players bet on the outcomes of dice rolls. Because dice tumble randomly and the outcome is not predictable, craps is a game of chance, thus unpredictable and risky. The earliest examples of this Americanism are from the 1960s.

People say, "It's a crap shoot," usually with a sense of mild scorn (if it's somebody else) or resignation (if it's yourself) about the chances of success of a given activity or venture. It says the result is out of one's hands, that it's left up to chance, and that the odds are probably slightly against you.

"Shoot the crap" has an unrelated meaning—to talk casually about unimportant matters.

Chat rooms, perhaps?

EPHEMERA

"Ephemera" are transitory things that exist or are used for only a short time and have no lasting significance. These range from sunsets and rainbows to the minor documents of everyday life, such as paper items meant to be discarded. French historian Fernand Braudel referred to past events as "the ephemera of history," likening them to fireflies that light the dark for just a moment.

The word "ephemera" (both singular and plural) came originally from Greece and can be traced to Aristotle. In Latin, ephemera was a medical term for a fever that didn't last long (late 1300s). By the 1600s, the sense was extended to short-lived insects and flowers. In 1751, Samuel Johnson used the term in reference to "the papers of the day."

Since the printing revolution, ephemera has been an element of everyday life. A small example of what can be included: menus, newspapers, postcards, posters, sheet music, stickers, valentines, air transport labels, bingo cards, bus tickets, envelopes, paper dolls, stamps, ticket stubs, and junk mail.

Ephemera has long been collected by families, hobbyists, and curators. Multiple scholars cite a connection to the past, such as nostalgia or a love of history, as a key motivation for collecting. Victorian families pasted their collections of ephemera, such as ticket stubs and trade cards, in scrapbooks.

Artistic ephemera include sand paintings, sculptures composed of intentionally transient material, graffiti, and guerrilla art. Over 500 categories are listed in *The Encyclopedia of Ephemera*, ranging from the 18th to 20th century.

Many scholars have been collectors, archivists, and amateurs, particularly at the inception of ephemera studies, a now burgeoning academic field. Challenges include determining its creator, purpose, date and location of origin and impact thereof. Ephemera has been credited with illustrating social dynamics, including daily life, communication, social mobility, and the enforcement of social norms.

In 1998, librarian Richard Stone wrote that the internet "can be seen as the ultimate in ephemera with its vast amount of information and advertising which is extremely transitory and volatile in nature, and vulnerable to change or deletion." Internet memes and selfies have been described as

forms of ephemera.

If anyone wants to collect my junk mail, digital or paper, please do. Take it away; I'm overwhelmed!



WRITING

LITERARY TERMS

Literary terms refer to the techniques, styles, and formatting used to create compelling compositions. These terms also include names for universal truths, such as aphorism, epigram, saw, maxim, proverb, and so on. I've never understood how these terms differ, but curiosity finally won and here are the results of my search. I was surprised to discover that there is actually very little difference between them.

ADAGE — accepted wisdom about how to live in the form of short, memorable sayings. An example is "An apple a day keeps the doctor away." From *Beekeeper and the Bees*: "Things are not always what they seem."

ALLEGORY — a story within a story. For example, the surface story might be about two neighbors throwing rocks at each other, the hidden story about war between countries. In most allegories, the hidden story has something to do with politics, religion, or morality.

APHORISM — a short statement of a general truth, insight, or good advice, usually in a witty, philosophical manner. But these have single authors whom we can trace. For example, "all's well that ends well" was originally created by Shakespeare as a title for his 1605 play.

AXIOM — a self-evident truth or principle that requires no proof (for example, "no one gives what he does not have"). It serves as a premise for further reasoning or arguments. (Synonyms: postulate, assumption.)

EPIGRAM — a short but insightful statement, often in verse form, which communicates a thought in a witty, paradoxical, or funny way. "I can resist everything but temptation."

FIGURE OF SPEECH — a word or phrase used in a way which has a meaning different to the dictionary definition. They can be metaphors, similes, sarcasm, alliteration (my favorite), understatements, etc. "Break a leg!" Not a command, but a good luck wish.

IDIOM — idioms express an idea in words that typically wouldn't make sense together (e.g., "by the skin of your teeth"). They are often used in poetry. An idiom is part of the language, whereas a figure of speech may simply be invented by an individual author.

MAXIM — a little piece of wisdom or a general rule of behavior. A maxim is pithy. That is, it packs a lot of meaning into just a few words.

METAPHOR — a figure of speech that relates two unrelated things. For instance, if you say someone has “a sea of knowledge,” you are using a metaphor to express how much they know. Einstein said, “All religions, arts, and sciences are branches of the same tree.” He wasn’t talking about a literal tree but showing a close relationship between different topics by suggesting that they’re all part of the same living thing.

PARABLE — a short story used to illustrate a moral lesson. Perhaps the most famous is that of *The Boy Who Cried Wolf*. A young boy enjoys yelling “wolf” and laughing as the adults in his village run around in a panic. But when he sees an actual wolf and cries out “wolf” to get help, no one believes him anymore, and no one comes to help. This kind of story seems to stick in our minds better than the simple statement “don’t lie.”

PROVERB — a short, pithy, traditional saying, (often of ancient or unknown origin) stating a general truth or piece of advice about daily life. “If you chase two rabbits, you will lose them both.” (Russian proverb) This one draws on a simple metaphor of chasing rabbits. The rabbits can stand in for all sorts of objectives, from jobs to relationships, but the coded message is quite clear — focus your energy on a single objective, or you will likely fail.

SAW — a maxim, proverb, adage, aphorism, epigram, or saying.

SAYING — a maxim, proverb, adage, aphorism, epigram, or saw.

TRUISM — an aphorism or proverb that’s so vague or trite that it’s almost meaningless. It’s an example of cliché, depending on how many times you’ve heard it. If you’ve never heard it before, though, it may sound like a profound insight. There are two other names for truisms: platitudes and bromides. A platitude is a truism on a moral topic. “Life’s not fair.” A bromide is a comforting truism. “Things always work out in the end.”

I don't know about you, but I'm probably still going to get confused. Not about puns, though. I always know one of those when I see it. And here's my favorite:

A raven has 17 rigid feathers called pinions, while a crow has only 16. The difference between a raven and a crow is just a matter of a pinion.

SCARE QUOTES

"Scare quotes" are quotation marks used in a non-standard way to express skepticism or derision about the use of the enclosed word or phrase. TV Tropes calls it Sarcasm Mode.

Also nicknamed shudder quotes, sneer quotes, and quibble marks, such punctuation replaces the use of "so-called" to indicate an ironic meaning. Whether quotation marks are considered scare quotes depends on context because scare quotes are not visually different from actual quotations.

In speech, a stand-in for scare quotes is a hand gesture known as air quotes or finger quotes, which mimics quotation marks. Alternatively, a speaker may say "quote" before and "unquote" after quoted words.

Elizabeth Anscombe coined the term scare quotes in 1956 in an essay published in *Mind*. However, the use of a graphic symbol to indicate irony or dubiousness goes back much further. Authors in ancient Greece used a mark called a *diple periestigmene* for that purpose. Since the 1990s, the use of scare quotes has become very popular.

The Atlantic writes: "to put terms like 'identity politics' or 'rape culture' or 'alt-right' in scare quotes is to make a political declaration."

The use of scare quotes has been described as expressing distrust in truth, reality, facts, reason, and objectivity. Well, that too is a political comment. Scare quotes can also express distrust in what the writer regards as falsity, lies, unreason, and subjectivity.

For example, the "climate emergency" touted everywhere does not exist.

GHOSTING

It's not Hallowe'en and I'm not talking about the spirit of a deceased writer reluctant to quit hitting the keyboard. A "ghostwriter" is a professional writer who writes books and other materials for another person, the "author." This writer gets paid to write the book (or blog or article), while the author gets the royalties and the glory. The term is an Americanism dating to around 1900.

Ghostwriters are hired for numerous reasons. Celebrities, executives, and politicians often do not have the time, discipline, or writing skills to research and write a several hundred-page autobiography or "how-to" book. Sometimes, publishers use ghostwriters to quickly release a topical book or other material that ties in with recent events.

The Nancy Drew series, which debuted in 1930, has always been attributed to Carolyn Keene. The series is actually written by ghostwriters. The publishing industry calls this practice book packaging.

Ghostwriting also occurs in other creative fields. The composer Mozart was

paid to ghostwrite music for wealthy patrons who wished to give the impression that they were gifted composers. The practice also applies to the visual arts, most commonly paintings. The extent of the master artist's contribution varies widely, as little as composition adjustments and corrective brush strokes, or as much as entire works.

Usually, there is a confidentiality clause in the contract between the ghostwriter and the credited author that obligates the former to remain anonymous. Sometimes the ghostwriter is acknowledged by being called a "researcher" or "research assistant."

When ghostwriters are allowed to share the credit with their clients, a common method is to put the client's name on a book cover as the author (in large print) and then underneath the ghostwriter's name (in small print) following "with" or "as told to." Or, the ghost can be cited as a co-author of a book or listed in film credits for writing when having ghostwritten the script.

Papal encyclicals have been written by ghostwriters. A scientifically unethical practice is medical ghostwriting, where biotech or pharmaceutical companies pay professional writers to produce papers and then recruit (via payment or as a perk) other scientists or physicians to attach their names to these articles before they are published in scientific journals.

Some university and college students hire ghostwriters from essay mills to write entrance essays, term papers, theses, and dissertations. This is largely considered unethical unless the ghostwriting work is merely light editing.

There are thousands of ghostwritten books out there, dating back as early as the fourteenth century. It's not an uncommon practice; it's just rare that you see behind the curtain.

Many ghostwriters specialize in "disappearing" into the writing style readers are familiar with. They're talented impersonators who can mix their ideas, tone, and word choice with those of the person for whom they're writing. For those who possess this camouflaging skill, ghostwriting can be a lucrative career.

With celebrities that can almost guarantee large sales, the fees can be very high. In 2001, *The New York Times* stated that the fee that the ghostwriter for Hillary Clinton's memoirs would receive was probably about \$500,000 of her book's \$8 million advance, which "is near the top of flat fees paid to collaborators."

Some writers prefer to be anonymous because it's safe. And some enjoy writing as someone else so much that they do their best writing that way.

You know, like hiding under a sheet.

MARY SUE

A "Mary Sue" is a female character archetype, often portrayed as unbelievably competent across all domains, gifted with unique talents or powers, liked by most other characters, unrealistically free of weaknesses, drop-dead gorgeous, innately virtuous, and lacks any character flaws. She is almost always the main character and may be a fictionalized version of who the author wishes to be. A similar male archetype is "Gary Stu" or "Marty Stu."

The term Mary Sue was coined by Paula Smith in the 1973 short story *A Trekkie's Tale* (published in the Star Trek fanzine *Menagerie*), satirizing those idealized female characters widespread in Star Trek fan fiction. The story begins: "Gee, golly, gosh, gloriosky," thought Mary Sue as she stepped on the bridge of the Enterprise. "Here I am, the youngest lieutenant in the fleet—only fifteen and a half years old." Captain Kirk came up to her. "Oh, Lieutenant, I love you madly. Will you come to bed with me?"

In 1976, *Menagerie's* editors wrote: "Mary Sue stories—the adventures of the youngest and smartest ever person to graduate from the academy and ever get a commission at such a tender age. Usually characterized by unprecedented skill in everything from art to zoology, including karate and arm-wrestling. This character can also be found burrowing her way into the good graces/heart/mind of one of the Big Three [Kirk, Spock, and McCoy], if not all three at once. She saves the day by her wit and ability, and, if we are lucky, has the good grace to die at the end, being grieved by the entire ship."

In a 2011 interview, Smith said that the male alternative is rarely pointed out, citing James Bond and Superman as popular "Marty Stu" characters. Of course, watching well-liked fictional heroes who are mostly infallible is usually more satisfying than investing your emotional energy into failures. In practice, therefore, most characters fall somewhere on a continuum between constant failure and constant success, and it's up to each author to decide how often a character needs to fail to be realistic. Characters who unambiguously qualify as Sues under this definition are quite rare, usually the result of authors who are so much in love with their precious creations that they can't bear to see them face any setbacks whatsoever.

Mary Sues are not new. Charles Dickens, one of the established classic authors, used to specialize in creating characters like this.

It's true that most fictional characters are designed to be charismatic,

striking individuals who inspire strong reactions in the audience, but it's also true that in the real world, no matter how charismatic you are, people you know just don't spend all their time thinking about you. After all, many if not most people have a hard time truly accepting that they aren't themselves the center of the universe.

The term is sometimes used for sexist arguments, but it is important to acknowledge that male Mary Sues (or Gary Stus) are just as, if not more, prevalent in the grand scope of storytelling. Some critics argue that "Mary Sues opened up a gateway for writers, particularly women and members of underrepresented communities, to see themselves in extraordinary characters."

Salon wrote in 2015, "The term Mary Sue is rooted in a long history of dismissing female characters and holding them to absurd double standards," alluding to the point that identical forms of author wish-fulfillment with male characters/writers are rarely noticed or called out, while female characters tend to be held to a much higher degree of scrutiny when it comes to believable traits and abilities.

Here are a few definitions of Mary Sues from the *Urban Dictionary*:

—Victim Sue: A whiny, wimpy, pathetic female character who can't seem to do much of anything except cry and get herself into trouble, which the romantic interest of the fiction must rescue her from.

—Warrior Sue: Usually loud, obnoxious and (of course) an amazing warrior. She'll usually have some tragic past that led her to become a warrior, and she'll upstage all the other characters with her mad Sueish powers.

—Mage Sue: Has amazing strength in magic, or a magical power that nobody else has.

Finally, Mary Sues often have weird, improbable, or impossible bloodlines. A lover of the Tolkien novels might create her as the secret half-elf child of Elrond and a nameless human. The miscegenation possibilities are endless.

I don't know. If I were going to create a Mary Sue, I think I'd be a full-blooded elf and also invisible, so I could watch and comment on what all the other characters do.



BODY LANGUAGE

"Body language" consists of the gestures, movements, and mannerisms by which a person or animal communicates with others without using spoken language and, often, without conscious awareness of doing so. The first known use of the phrase was in 1885.

Body language includes facial expressions, body posture, gestures, eye movement, touch, and the use of space. In science, it's called kinesics. These nonverbal signals make up a huge part of daily communication. In fact, body language may account for 60% of all communication.

Just think of how often you smile, raise your eyebrows, or gesture with your hands. Think how dogs communicate by wagging their tails, how cats voice their approval of you by rubbing their foreheads against your leg.

But "body language" has a literal meaning, too: the words we use to describe various parts of the body. I'm going to investigate two everyday words we use for very important parts of our bodies: ass and guts.

Hang on, here we go!

ASS

"Ass" has several meanings: human buttocks, donkey, a foolish person.

The word has a long history, of course. The first known use was before the 1100s, but I'm sure it's been around since humans learned to talk, in one form or another. "Ass" came from Old English *assa*, and before that probably from Old Irish *asan*, and originally from Latin *asinus*.

It's considered a rude word when used for the part of the body you sit on. It's also a rude way of referring to another person or to yourself. "Get your ass in my office now!"

"Ass" was once "arse." By the 1680s, arse was being pronounced to rhyme with "-ass" words, as in *Sodom or the Quintessence of Debauchery*:

"I would advise you, sir, to make a pass
Once more at Pockenello's loyal arse."

The loss of "r" before "s" is not uncommon. Other examples are: burst/bust, curse/cuss, horse/hoss, parcel/passel.

SYNONYMS:

arse – British version of ass
backside – in 1860, it was nautical slang
behind – late; when you go somewhere, the ass arrives last
booty – since the 1400s, also plunder (as in war)
bottom – the part of a ship's hull underwater; last place
bum – loaf around, vagrant, poor quality
buns – not bread, but buttocks
butt – the thicker end of something, lol
buttock – in the 1670s, a common strumpet
caboose – one that brings up the rear
can – a vessel for holding um, liquids
cheeks – round and soft, like the ones on your face
derriere – from the French, always so much more polite
duff – round and firm, like the pudding, plum duff
fanny – British slang
fundament – from the 1300s, foundation, especially when sitting
gluteus maximus – a fleshy muscle forming most of the buttocks
hind end – the part that follows behind
hindquarters – 1740, used mostly for four-legged animals
jackass – a fool
keister – since 1930, British, a satchel (sometimes stuffed)
nates – from 1581, the Latin plural of *natis*, meaning buttock
posterior – situated behind, from Latin *posterus* - "coming after"
prat – British slang for a stupid person
rear – from the 1300s, from Middle English *reren*
rear end – the back part of something, such as a vehicle
rump – from the 1400s, Middle English, fat part of animal hindquarters
seat – not a chair, but what you put on it
stern – from the 1100s, rear end of a boat
tail – before the 1100s, rear end of a process
tush – 1970, perhaps from Yiddish

SLANG EXPRESSIONS:

arse-winning – in the late 1300s, money obtained by prostitution
ass-backwards – contrary to what is usual or logical
ass-clown – a stupid or contemptible person
asshat – 1999, an idiot, "those wearing their ass as a hat"
asshole – 1300s, a stupid person
asswipe – toilet paper
badass – 1950s, mean; intrepid; something wonderful
bare-ass – naked
be on someone's ass – giving someone a hard time
blow smoke up someone's ass – pay insincere compliments
booty call – a sexual invitation or rendezvous
bore the ass off someone – be extremely boring
bum's rush – forcible and swift ejection from a place

bust ass – work very hard; beat up
butt-hurt – overly offended or resentful
cover your ass – protect yourself from risk, avoid blame
don't give a rat's ass – don't care even one tiny bit
drag ass – work slowly, feel tired
dumb-ass – stupid person
fat-ass – fat person
get off your ass – stop being lazy
get your ass in gear – get going
go ass over teakettle – 1884, head over heels, somersault
half-ass – less than the best, incompetent
half-assed – incomplete, inadequate
get your ass handed to you – get beat up or put down
hang the arse – in the 1630s, be reluctant or tardy
hard-ass – tough and uncompromising
haul ass – hurry or move fast
have your head stuck up your ass – not know what you're doing
have a horseshoe up your ass – be extremely lucky
horse's ass – a jerk
kick ass – have a strong effect
kick-ass – tough, aggressive, or just plain awesome
kiss ass – be extra nice in order to get something
kiss my ass! – screw you!
laughing my ass off – laughing hard, LMAO in internet chat
make an ass of yourself – behave stupidly or look silly
my ass! – that's unbelievable!
not give a rat's ass – not care
not know your ass from your elbow – know nothing, be stupid
out on your ass – forced to leave a job, person, or place
pain in the ass – an annoying person or thing
piece of ass – sexual intercourse, or a woman considered as a sexual object
put your ass on the line – risk yourself for something
save someone's ass – help someone in an important way
smartass – a know-it-all, or irritatingly clever
stick it up your ass ("up yours!") – an exclamation of defiance ("go to hell!")
talk out of your ass – talk nonsense
tight-ass – a rigidly conventional or inhibited person
up to your ass in alligators – swamped with problems or work
work your ass off – work very hard

TRIVIA:

– "Callipygian" is an adjective meaning "shapely rear end." Callipygian comes from the combination of the two ancient Greek words for "beauty" and "buttocks" and was used to name a statue of the Greek goddess of love, the so-called Aphrodite Kallipygos, who raises her robe to reveal her backside.

–Ass. is the abbreviation for association.

–Pompous Ass English Ale is the name of a pale ale from Great Lakes Brewery in Toronto.

I love the tasting notes: "Pompous Ass pours mahogany with a sturdy tan head providing aromas of dried leaf with an earthy touch that leads into soft citrus notes. Flavour is big on malt sweetness up front, followed by notes of raisin, tea, and subtle caramel, giving way to a very pleasant, earthy, and citrus hop flavour. The soft carbonation produces a sessionable, medium body."

"Sessionable" beer means one that is relatively low in alcohol content and therefore suitable for drinking over an extended period.

I never knew beer had so many different flavors. To me, it just tastes like beer.

GUTS

"Gut," as a noun, is a term for the lower part of the alimentary canal, the intestines, bowels, or entrails. It can also mean the inner, essential parts of a machine, building, or device. As a verb, it means to remove the entrails from an animal or to destroy the insides of something. In physics, it's spelled GUT, meaning "grand unification theory." You can't get much grander than that idea.

The word was first recorded before 1000 and comes from Middle English *gutt* and Old English *gutta*, akin to *gēotan*, meaning "to pour."

"Guts" is also used to mean:

- courage and fortitude, nerve, determination, stamina
- what is basic, essential, or natural: a gut problem
- a narrow passage, waterway, or small creek
- our basic instincts: "my gut says," a gut feeling, a gut reaction

And how about this for a \$10 word? "Borborygmus" describes the rumbling noise your stomach makes when you've got some gas brewing.

SYNONYMS:

As a noun: digestive tract, duodenum, innards, viscera, vitals, tripe
belly, abdomen, stomach, paunch
grit, moxie, backbone, heart, sand

As a verb: eviscerate, disembowel, ransack

SLANG PHRASES:

beer gut – a fat belly caused by drinking too much beer
bust a gut – work or try very hard, or laugh very hard
gut it out – tough it out, persevere
gut punch – news or a shock so bad that your gut reacts
gut rot – an upset stomach from drinking too much alcohol
rotgut – cheap or inferior liquor
gut shot – stomach wounded by gunfire
gut-wrenching – causing mental or emotional anguish
gutful – as much as you can bear, or eat
gutless – cowardly
gutsy – showing courage; food or drink strongly flavorsome
gutted – feeling very upset, eviscerated
hate somebody's guts – feel a strong hatred
have somebody's guts for garters – threat to punish severely
no guts, no glory – success is impossible without taking risks
spill one's guts – tell all, lay oneself bare

According to John Hopkins Medicine, if you've ever "gone with your gut" to make a decision or felt "butterflies in your stomach" when nervous, you're likely getting signals from your second brain. And yes, you have one.

This little brain is called the enteric nervous system. It consists of two thin layers of more than 100 million nerve cells lining the gastrointestinal tract from esophagus to rectum. It controls digestion but also communicates with our big brain.

For decades, it was thought that anxiety and depression contribute to gut problems. But researchers are finding that irritation in the gastrointestinal system may send signals that trigger mood changes and possibly thinking skills, too. Such signals may also affect metabolism, which involves interactions between nerve signals, gut hormones and the bacteria that live in the digestive system.

Have you ever wondered how your rectum tells the difference between wind and stool? This is important. Mistakes do happen, but they're uncommon thanks to the competence of your rectum, anal sphincter, and that little brain, the enteric nervous system.

I think I've covered the guts of the subject.



FOOTLOOSE

FOOTLOOSE AND FANCY-FREE

If you're "footloose and fancy-free," you have no responsibilities and no attachments, especially romantic ones, and are free to do as you please.

Footloose, meaning "free to go anywhere," was used literally in the late 1600s to mean "free to move the feet." No leg or ankle chains, perhaps. Fancy-free, meaning not in love (fancy once meant "in love"), dates from the 1500s. It was used by Shakespeare in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*.

Here's a more poetic definition. The "foot" is the bottom of a sail, and a sail that is "footloose" is free to move whichever way the wind blows. So, a person who is "footloose and fancy-free" is at liberty to let the breeze take him where it will.

It's probable that the two words were put together about 1880 in the US to make an alliterative phrase. The first known written record was in the *Jackson Sentinel* (Maquoketa, Iowa), 19 Oct. 1882.

It's how I float around the house on a sunlit morning when I have no place to go and nothing on my to-do list.

FINDING YOUR FEET

When you use the term "finding your feet," you mean that you're becoming confident in a new situation. It's generally used in the sense of establishing yourself in a particular field.

This phrase has been around since ancient times, but the origin is unknown. It obviously refers to young humans and animals standing up and learning to walk.

STEP ON SOMEONE'S TOES

To "step on someone's toes" means to insult or offend that person, especially by encroaching on their sphere of influence or criticizing their actions.

The idiom has been in use since at least the mid-1800s and the analogy between physical and emotional pain is obvious.

COLD FEET

If you get "cold feet," you suffer a loss of courage and confidence and refuse to follow through on your plans. The phrase is often applied to long-term or risky commitments. For example, "I got cold feet when I learned the trip involves white-water rafting."

The exact origin and first use of the phrase remain unknown and debated. It was apparently used in 1605 in *Volpone*, a play by Ben Jonson, and since then by other writers. In early 1600s Italy, it meant to be short of money, but that sense has never been used in English. Nor is there any obvious connection with the literal experience of cold feet.

A common use of the phrase is when people fear the commitment of marriage and get "cold feet" before a wedding ceremony. Research on the "cold feet" phenomenon is limited, but one study found that doubt or uncertainty about an impending marriage was associated with future marital problems and a viable predictor of divorce.

So, if you're getting cold feet about your imminent marriage, perhaps your brain is telling you something.

FOOT THE BILL

To "foot the bill" means to pay for something.

The word "foot" comes from the figurative sense of foot that refers to the end or bottom of something, such as the foot of a ladder. For this idiom, however, "foot" comes from the practice of adding up a column of figures and writing the result at the bottom of the column.

The idiom is derived from an earlier idiom first used in the 1500s, "to foot up." This meant to add up the figures on a document and write the total at the foot. By the early 1800s, the phrase had morphed into today's form,

This quote is from *The Rover Boys on the Great Lakes*, by Arthur M Winfield, published in 1901: "The two counted the pile and found it footed up to two hundred and forty dollars."

Maybe a person gets cold feet when they don't want to foot the bill.

GET OFF ON THE WRONG FOOT

To "get off on the wrong foot" means to make a bad start at something, especially a project or relationship.

So, if there's a wrong foot, is there a right foot? Historically, the answer is

yes. The "wrong" foot refers to the left foot. An ancient superstition says that the left side of the body relates to bad luck and evil. Latin for left is "sinister," meaning dark and suspicious. To get off on the wrong, or left, foot would be to invite misfortune into your life.

"Get off on the right foot" is also in common use. But we don't know how these two phrases originated. They sound old, and Shakespeare did use the notion of a "better" foot (which implies there is also a wrong foot) in *King John*, in 1595.

In ancient Greece, it was thought unlucky to enter a house or to leave one's chamber left foot foremost. Augustus was apparently very superstitious on this point. Pythagoras taught that it is necessary to put your shoes on right foot first.

But perhaps the phrase comes from the military and soldiers marching in step. If every soldier doesn't start on the correct foot, all the marchers will be out of step with each other.

PUT ONE'S BEST FOOT FORWARD

To "put one's best foot forward" means trying to make the best possible impression or to work hard on doing something difficult. Or you could say, "get off on the right foot."

The Random House Dictionary of Popular Proverbs and Sayings dates "Always put your best foot forward" to 1495, but it's not found written until the second edition of Sir Thomas Overbury's poem *A Wife*, circa 1613.

The origin of this phrase is unknown. One theory is that to put one's best foot forward refers to starting a journey with your strongest foot. Another theory is that the left side was considered the sinister, evil, or unlucky side. Therefore, no matter what the task, one would always start out on the right foot to ensure good luck.

From a purely physical standpoint, how do you determine which is your best foot?

HAVE TWO LEFT FEET

If you have "two left feet," you're awkward or clumsy, especially in such things as dancing or playing a sport.

And, as we've just learned, left feet are evil and unlucky.

WAITING FOR THE OTHER SHOE TO DROP

"Waiting for the other shoe to drop" means waiting for the next, seemingly inevitable (and typically negative) thing to happen. That might be called anticipatory anxiety.

Eric Partridge, in his *Dictionary of Catch Phrases: American and British, from the Sixteenth Century to the Present Day* relates the story that goes with the phrase. A man who lives on an upper floor of a rooming house comes home late at night. First, he takes off one shoe and drops it loudly on the floor, waking up the man in the room below. Then he remembers to be quiet. He takes off the other shoe and sets it down carefully and silently. After a few minutes, his neighbor, who has been lying awake all this time, yells up, "For God's sake, drop the other shoe!"

The saying is now also used when waiting to see what someone else will do before committing oneself to any action. For instance, a company may lay off its sales force. The rest of the employees wait to see what the company's next step will be, or "wait for the other shoe to drop," before they decide whether to seek new employment.

GET A FOOT IN THE DOOR

To "get a foot in the door" means to take the first step toward a goal, such as establishing oneself in an organization or a career. For example, "He took a job as a secretary to get his foot in the door." There is sometimes the implication that this action is aggressive or pushy.

The idiom refers to the act of gaining an initial opportunity, an opening, or a chance to do something more significant in the future. It's mostly used in the context of employment or business because it suggests the idea of getting a small position or role that can lead to much larger opportunities down the line. The phrase dates to the 1800s.

The early use of the term "putting a foot in the door" is straightforward and literal. It refers to a door-to-door salesman who keeps the door from shutting with his foot, giving the customer no choice but to listen to the sales pitch. We now use the term in a figurative sense, with a similar meaning to "the thin end of the wedge."

There is now an acronym for the phrase, created by the people who study the psychology of selling. Foot-in-the-door (FITD) technique is a compliance tactic that aims at getting a person to agree to a large request by having them agree to a modest request first. For example, a study showed that filling out a questionnaire about organ donation increased the willingness of

participants to then become organ donors.

My cat is an expert at FITD. If I give her one treat, she makes it clear that I should follow up with at least ten more.

HAVE ONE FOOT IN THE GRAVE

To "have one foot in the grave" means to be very old or ill and near death. The first example of the expression in print is found in Philip Massinger's and Nathan Field's play, *The Fatall Dowry: A Tragedy*, 1632.

MY FOOT!

The Oxford English Dictionary says that the exclamation "My foot!" expresses contemptuous contradiction and is first found in print in 1923. It is probably euphemistic for "My ass!" in the same sense, which dates to 1796.

It has the same meaning, strong contradiction, surprise, or disagreement, as saying, "Like hell!" In other words, you don't believe what another person just told you.

GET YOUR FEET WET

The idiom "to get your feet wet" means to begin doing a new job or activity in a brief and simple way to become more familiar with it. For example, "She got her feet wet at her new job by doing some simple filing tasks." Another might be, "She kibitzed at the bridge table to see if she liked the game well enough to learn it."

The phrase is ancient, and the source is fear of water, meaning something new. Someone who has never learned to swim hesitates to get into the pool and will slowly get his or her feet wet first, to see how it feels before diving in.

Similar phrases are "put a toe in the water," or "dip a toe in the water," meaning to test the temperature, or to try an activity briefly to see if one likes it.

DRAG YOUR FEET

"Dragging your feet" means to avoid doing something for a long time; to put off, dawdle, avoid, stall, delay, or procrastinate.

The term arose from the idea of walking while dragging one's feet along the

ground, either from lack of enthusiasm or to intentionally slow down movement.

PUT YOUR FOOT DOWN

To "put your foot down" means to take a firm stand, to be unyielding in one's position or decision. It can also mean to assert something strongly.

Although versions of this term (usually as "set one's foot down") exist from the 1500s, this one became current only in the 1800s.

I suppose you could say the source is stamping your foot, which demands attention. I don't think I've stamped my feet since I was about four years old, but my voice can carry the same message.

PUT YOUR FOOT IN IT

To "put your foot in it" means to unintentionally say something foolish, tactless, or offensive, to make a verbal blunder. For example, "I really put my foot in it when I asked her when she was getting married."

The image is of inadvertently stepping in something you would rather have avoided.

This term dates from the early 1700s and presumably was analogous to literally putting a foot in the wrong place. Jonathan Swift used it in *Polite Conversation* (1738). Putting one's foot in one's mouth is of more recent provenance (see below).

PUT YOUR FOOT IN YOUR MOUTH

To "put your foot in your mouth" is to say something stupid, foolish, or tactless which causes someone to be embarrassed or hurt.

Putting one's foot in one's mouth merited a definition in P. W. Joyce's *English As We Speak It* (1910). It suggested that you would say to a person who habitually uses unfortunate blundering expressions, "You never open your mouth, but you put your foot in it." Today it is sometimes referred to as foot-in-mouth disease.

One origin alludes to stepping in something unpleasant. This would have been common back in the days when horses were the main mode of travel and cows wandered freely on village streets. Other sources say that it derived from a variation of 'foot and mouth disease,' a dreadful medical condition affecting animals with hooves.

I like Wiktionary's solution: "a closed mouth gathers no feet."

HAVE ITCHY FEET

Having itchy feet means not being able to settle down. Your restless feet itch to stray from routine, to go traveling or, at least, to do something different. The earliest evidence for the term is from 1920, in the *Los Angeles Times*.

KEEP SOMEONE ON THEIR TOES

If you're keeping someone on their toes, you're keeping that person alert and prepared to deal with problems. For example, "Regular surprise visits help to keep the staff on their toes."

Is that why my cat occasionally wakes me up at 3:00 a.m.?

STAND ON YOUR OWN TWO FEET

"Standing on your own two feet" means being independent and self-reliant. It means that you can provide all that you need for living without help from anyone else.

My cat stands on her own four feet but still demands that I provide her with food.

WALK ON EGGSHELLS

To "walk on eggshells" means to be very careful about what you say to someone because they are easily upset or offended. It can also mean to be sensitive in handling delicate matters. For example, a woman with an abusive husband may always be "walking on eggshells" around him.

This 1800s phrase clearly originates from the imagery of fragile eggshells. Some sources say that the phrase was adapted from "walking on eggs," which came into use in the 1700s. It seems to me impossible to walk on either eggs or eggshells without crushing them.

A phrase with similar implications is "walking on thin ice."

When the need for diplomacy and tact outweigh the need for direct confrontation, it's necessary to tread lightly, no matter what is underfoot.

BRING SOMEONE TO HEEL

To "bring someone to heel" is to force that person to obey you. The phrase arose in the late 1800s, from the command to make a dog closely follow its master.

COOL ONE'S HEELS

If you're cooling your heels, you're waiting for something to happen. It can also mean that someone is deliberately keeping you waiting, so that you get bored or impatient.

The literal origin of the phrase is related to horseback travel and horse racing in the 1500s. After a long trip or after racing, it was customary to help cool off horses by wetting down, or cooling down, their lower legs. This is still done today to aid in blood circulation.

George Chapman's 1611 translation of the *Iliad* included "cool'd their hoofs" in reference to waiting for something to occur.

In *Amelia*, published in 1752, Henry Fielding wrote, "In this parlour Amelia cooled her heels, as the phrase is, near a quarter of an hour."

DIG IN ONE'S HEELS

To "dig in your heels" means to be firm and resolute about something, to take a stand. In another sense, it means to be unyielding, obstinate, and refuse to change your plans or ideas when someone is trying to make you do so.

Of course, it can also mean firmly placing one's heels in the ground, particularly when playing tug of war. Similar phrases are "dig in your toes" and "dig in your feet."

The image here is of a horse or another animal, perhaps a mule, obstinately refusing to be led or ridden forwards.

HAVE A FOOT IN BOTH CAMPS

If you "have a foot in both camps," you are, perhaps opportunistically, sympathetic to two opposing viewpoints, without making a firm commitment to either.

In this early 1900s expression, "camp" alludes to encampments of enemy troops in a battle.

Similar phrases are, "double agent" and "run with the hare and hunt with the hounds." The latter expression was probably used long before the early 1900s.

FEET OF CLAY

For a man to have "feet of clay" means he has a hidden flaw or weakness in his character, even though he's greatly admired or respected. Some of the greatest geniuses in history had feet of clay.

The idiom suggests that despite appearances, we all are human and fallible, even those in positions of power or authority. It can also be used to refer to large groups, such as societies, businesses, and empires. An entity with feet of clay can appear powerful and unstoppable but may easily be knocked over.

The phrase originates from the Book of Daniel in the *Bible*. In it, Daniel interprets a dream of King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon. In that dream, a magnificent statue is seen with a head of gold, but weaker and less valuable metals beneath, until finally having feet of clay mixed with iron. Daniel predicts that the glorious statue shall be smashed by a stone into pieces, like chaff on the threshing floor, and blown to the winds. This image has long been an analogy for seemingly powerful figures with substantial weaknesses.

We all have vulnerabilities, but those who have been put on pedestals have farther to fall if their weaknesses are discovered.

HAVE THE WORLD AT ONE'S FEET

The idiom, "to have the world at one's feet," means to be extremely successful or popular and admired by many people. For example, "Five years after her debut, the diminutive star of the Royal Ballet has the world at her feet."

The phrase is often associated with Alexander the Great, who was said to have wept because there were no more worlds to conquer. It is believed that the expression "world at his feet" may have been coined in reference to Alexander's conquests and his perceived mastery of the known world.

KEEP ONE'S FEET ON THE GROUND

To "keep one's feet on the ground" means to remain realistic and responsible, and to act in a sensible and practical way even when new or exciting things are happening. Modern use has shortened the phrase to

"grounded."

LAND ON ONE'S FEET

To "land on one's feet" means to be in good condition or in a good situation after having a difficult experience. For example, "He lost his job but landed on his feet when he was hired by another company just a few days later."

This expression may refer to the fact that cats are thought to always land safely on their feet, even if they fall or jump from a very high place.

PUT ONE FOOT IN FRONT OF THE OTHER

To "put one foot in front of the other," means to keep moving, no matter what obstacles are in your way. There is an implication of difficulty, of struggle, resulting in trudging along, with no thought or expectation except for the next step.

PUT YOUR FEET UP

"Putting your feet up" means to sit and relax somewhere comfortable, not working or being active. The image is of someone sprawled comfortably in an easy chair, feet resting on a hassock rather than supporting any weight.

PUT YOUR FOOT TO THE FLOOR

To "put your foot to the floor" means to speed up, to do something with much effort, energy, or determination. The term arose from driving automobiles, where putting your foot down hard on the accelerator means feeding more gas to the engine to produce more power and thus speeding up.

I prefer the slangy term, "put the pedal to the metal."

SET FOOT SOMEWHERE

To "set foot somewhere" simply means to physically go to that place. It is often used in the negative sense, where you say that you "never set foot in a place."

SHOOT ONESELF IN THE FOOT

If you "shoot yourself in the foot," you've done or said something disadvantageous to your own interests. Similar phrases are, "dig one's own grave" and "foul one's own nest." The term alludes to an accidental shooting

as opposed to a deliberate one done to avoid military service.

As a literal expression describing an accidental injury it's from the mid 1800s. Such accidents have been happening frequently ever since firearms became portable.

But sometimes the shooting is deliberate. During the First World War, some soldiers shot themselves in the foot so they would be sent to the hospital tent rather than into battle. Obviously, these soldiers claimed to have shot themselves accidentally.

Shooting oneself in the foot is usually the result of incompetence and has led to the current meaning of making an embarrassing error of judgement or inadvertently making one's own situation worse.

THE SHOE IS ON THE OTHER FOOT

The phrase "the shoe is on the other foot" means that a situation has been reversed so that someone who caused another's misfortune is now suffering the same misfortune.

This saying began life as "the boot is on the other leg," appearing in print in the mid-1800s. Putting the left shoe on the right foot would, of course, entail considerable discomfort, a meaning retained in the metaphor, which implies "See how you like being in my place."

The person enjoying this possibly inadvertent revenge would probably be saying, in his head, "Nyah, nyah, nyah!"

THINK ON YOUR FEET

"Thinking on your feet" means to solve a problem quickly, especially in unexpected situations, or to react to events decisively without prior thought or planning. This means you're thinking clearly, even under stress.

The origin of the idiom, which came into use around 1900, is unknown. The imagery is that of a person in action. Imagine a tennis player having to make split-second decisions, or a lawyer questioning a witness, or a public speaker fielding questions from the audience.

I much prefer to think leisurely in a comfortable armchair.

PLAY FOOTSIE

To "play footsie" primarily means to flirt. One person touches someone

else's feet lightly with their own feet, especially under a table, as a playful expression of romantic interest, or simply for enjoyment. But the phrase can also have a darker significance, meaning to cooperate or curry favor with in a sly or secret way. For example, "World leaders are playing footsie with terrorists."

Although "footsie" is not inherently romantic, the nature of it as playful touching is often done between lovers as a sign of affection, and most often without discussion. The term comes from a 1940s humorous diminutive of foot.

If you want details on how to play footsie, there are, of course, websites which offer instruction.



WHEN IN ROME

"When in Rome, do as the Romans do" is a proverb. It recommends following the local customs and traditions when you're in a foreign land or a strange place. The expression is also commonly used in everyday situations. It's a cliché nowadays, so that merely saying "when in Rome..." gets the point across.

Saint Augustine, when he wished to visit Rome, discovered that Saturday was observed as a fast day there. But it was not a fast day where he lived in Milan. Saint Ambrose advised him as follows, "When I am here (in Milan) I do not fast on Saturday, when in Rome I do fast on Saturday."

Later, St Augustine recorded those prudent words in a letter, allowing modern scholars to pinpoint the origins of the expression to a particular event in history. Sources date the letter between 387–390 CE.

Henry Porter came close to the modern version of the phrase in his 1599 play *The Pleasant History of the Two Angry Women of Abington*. "Nay, I hope, as I have temperance to forbear drink, so have I patience to endure drink."

It was Robert Burton, in 1621, who is most widely credited with making the phrase famous, even if he didn't use it word for word. His book *The Anatomy of Melancholy* states, "When they are at Rome, they do there as they see done, puritans with puritans, papists with papists."

In 1777, the phrase was used almost as we know it today, as evidenced in the *Interesting Letters of Pope Clement XIV*. "The siesto, or afternoon's nap of Italy would not have alarmed you so much, if you had recollected, that when we are at Rome, we should do as the Romans do."

If I were touring Rome, I would take this phrase as giving me free rein to indulge in as much gelato and pasta as I wanted.

ALL ROADS LEAD TO ROME

"All roads lead to Rome" is an idiom which suggests there are many different ways to achieve the same result, that many paths lead to the same destination. The saying refers to the vast network of roads built up during Rome's early history. These roads, which stretched for more than 250,000 miles at the height of the Roman Empire, connected the capital with all parts of its empire—from Scotland in the north to Egypt in the south, from Portugal in the west to Syria in the east.

We don't know exactly when or where the phrase originated, but it was already in use as early as the 1100s. For example, 12th century French theologian Alain deLille wrote in *Liber Parabolarum*, "A thousand roads lead men forever to Rome."

The fourth century BCE was a period of rapid expansion for Rome, and the city was at war with two neighbouring tribes, the Etruscans to the north and the Samnites to the south. Rome's consuls learned that marching men and dragging baggage trains across rough country was highly ineffective. Fortunately, the Romans loved building things and prided themselves on efficiency.

Thus, the first great road, the Appian Way, was built in 312 BCE and the Etruscans and Samnites were soon brought to heel. Emperor Caesar Augustus erected a monument called the *Milliarium Aureum* (golden milestone) in Rome's central forum, and the distances to various major cities were measured from this point.

Augustus also established the *cursus publicus*, a system of inns and waystations along the major roads to provide lodging and fresh horses for people on imperial business. This system was only open to those with a special permit. Even dignitaries were not allowed to abuse the system, with emperors cracking down on those who tried.

The capital city of Rome was then considered the center of the world, certainly by the Romans themselves. As the Augustan poet, Ovid, wrote in his *Fasti* (a poem about the Roman calendar), "There is a fixed limit to the territory of other peoples, but the territory of the city of Rome and the world are one and the same."

Rome was a major city, a hub of trade, politics, and culture. Roads were necessary for waging war, but they also meant trade, and trade meant money. So, a vast series of major roads and paths made up the city as well as surrounded it, all leading to its center.

And the roads did all lead directly to Rome, at least within a significant part of the Italian Peninsula. This was to ensure that there was a road connecting all secondary cities to Rome but no roads connecting the cities to each other, making it more difficult for the cities to collude and revolt against Rome.

More than 7000 milestones survive today. In central Italy, the milestones usually gave distances to Rome itself, but in the north and south, other cities served as the node in their regions.

The idiom 'all roads lead to Rome' has been used in films, television series, and songs. But the use that makes me smile comes from eastern parts of the US. Americans there say, "When you die, whether you go to heaven or hell, you have to change planes in Atlanta."

ROME WASN'T BUILT IN A DAY

The phrase "Rome wasn't built in a day" means that important work takes time, and you cannot rush it or expect to do it quickly.

Today, Rome is a magnificent city, but back when this proverb was first used (about 1,000 years ago), the scale and opulence of Rome were unprecedented. Therefore, "Rome" in this saying is a metaphor for excellence of the highest order.

The first known reference to the saying was by a 12th-century cleric in the court of Phillippe of Alsace, the Count of Flanders.

Around 1538, author John Heywood included it in his work, *A Dialogue Containing the Number in Effect of all the Proverbs in the English Tongue*. Heywood was well known for his plays and poems, but it was his collection of proverbs that really made him famous. "Out of sight, out of mind," "better late than never," and "the more the merrier" were all documented by Heywood.

Rome has stunning architecture, thousands of artistic masterpieces, and countless ancient treasures. Such rich offerings developed over thousands of years. As the saying goes, Rome wasn't built in a day.

ROMAN SAYINGS

Ancient Romans were creating sayings and maxims at least twenty-five hundred years ago. As they would have said, *nil novi sub sole* — "There's nothing new under the sun."

Lovers are out of their minds. — Love is blind. Or, as a recent cartoon put it, "The brain is the most outstanding organ. It works for 24 hours a day, 365 days a year, right from your birth until you fall in love."

Like father, like son. — A chip off the old block. Or, the apple doesn't fall far from the tree.

Fortune goes to the bold. — Nothing ventured, nothing gained, but a good nap sets one up for the rest of the day.

The end justifies the means. — This is what people still say to justify their greed.

Let my will stand as a reason. — Don't argue; just do as I say.

It will not be summer forever. — Everything comes to an end.

Let arms yield to the toga. — The army must be a servant of the state.

Fight fire with fire. — Meet force with force.

Well done. Bravo! — Congratulations!

A word to the wise is sufficient. — To inform the intelligent, few words are needed.

Soon it will be night; let's attend to business. — Get the show on the road!

The cobbler should not judge above the sandal. — Judge only what you can do expertly yourself.

More people die partying than in war. — Drunkenness kills more than the sword.

In the consulship of Plancus. — Back in the good old days!

To hold a wolf by the ears. — The implication is to get on with a job, difficult as it may be. Today, we "take the bull by the horns."

Enjoy today; put little trust in tomorrow. — Make hay while the sun shines. Or, make the most of an opportunity while you have the chance.

CARPE DIEM

"Carpe diem" is an extremely popular Latin phrase meaning "seize the day." In other words, make the most of today, because there's no guarantee you'll be around tomorrow. And, even if you are, who knows what tomorrow will bring?

The phrase was penned by Quintus Horatius Flaccus, also known as the lyric poet Horace, who lived in the first century BCE. It found its way into the English language in the early 1800s, when the poet, Lord Byron, used it.

Robin Williams is well-known for making this motivational Latin phrase the motto for his English class in the 1989 movie *Dead Poets Society*.

Many English proverbs lecture us to be wise with our time, such as, "The early bird catches the worm."

No worm for me. I'd rather seize the day. And put jam on my toast.



JOES & JEANS

I like the word "joe." It's not only the name of my favorite beverage, but of my favorite bridge partner as well. So, I decided to see how many ways the word Joe is used in our language. Then I gave him a Jean and a Jill to keep him company.

JOE COOL

"Joe Cool" is any guy that can stay calm under extreme pressure. It works for women, too. Just say "Jo Cool."

Joe Cool began as one of Snoopy's alter-egos, first appearing in a *Peanuts* comic strip in May 1971. To become Joe Cool, the beagle simply puts on a pair of sunglasses, leans against a wall, and says his name is Joe Cool. As Joe Cool, Snoopy believes he is really cool, perhaps like James Dean or Fonzie from *Happy Days*.

Joe Montana was known as "Joe Cool" while he was leading the 49ers to Super Bowls and establishing himself as one of the greatest players in NFL history in 2021.

Now Joe Cool is a popular emoji. And when I'm in a tough bridge game, I put on sunglasses and a bored expression.

JOE BTF SPLK

"Joe Btfsplk" was a character in the satirical comic strip *Li'l Abner* (1934-1977) by cartoonist Al Capp. He was well-meaning but the world's worst jinx, bringing disastrous misfortune to everyone around him. Ever since his first appearance in July 1940, a small, dark rain cloud hovered over his head to symbolize his bad luck.

In addition to the obvious comic effect, Capp often used Joe Btfsplk as a *deus ex machina* to produce miraculous rescues or to effect plot twists. Joe was later licensed for use in a series of animated TV commercials for *Head & Shoulders*, a dandruff shampoo. I wonder if the raindrops from the black cloud were meant to represent the dandruff cure.

According to Al Capp, "btfsplk" is a rude sound. During public lectures, Capp demonstrated this sound by closing his lips, leaving his tongue sticking out, and then blowing out air. This is colloquially called a "raspberry" or Bronx cheer.

I can't imagine any better way to pronounce the unpronounceable.

A CUP OF JOE

"A cup of Joe" is a nickname for a cup of coffee. It's a first-thing-in-the-morning friend to many of us and we've given it many nicknames—battery acid, bean juice, brain juice, brew, java, jitter juice, jet fuel, morning mud, liquid energy—the list goes on and on.

We don't know where this term came from, but there are three main theories.

The first theory focuses on the name "Joe," a slang name for "the common man" or "an average joe." This usage appeared in English lexicon around 1846. Hence, a "cup of Joe" is the "common man's drink."

The second theory says it started with Josephus Daniels, Secretary of the Navy in 1913, who prohibited alcohol aboard naval vessels, thus leading to more coffee consumption. From then on, the strongest drink of any kind allowed on naval ships has been coffee. The sailors and officers weren't happy with the changes, of course, so they started to call coffee a "cup of Joe" out of spite.

The third theory is that "Joe" is a shortened version of two other slang terms for coffee: java and jamoke. Jamoke itself is a combination slang word for java and mocha.

As an average Josephine, my relationship with a cup of Joe appears below.

JEANS

"Jeans" refers to "blue jeans," arguably the most popular trousers in existence. The copper-riveted pockets were invented by Jacob W. Davis in 1871 and patented by Davis and Levi Strauss on May 20, 1873. Prior to the patent, the term "blue jeans" had been in use for working garments (trousers, overalls, coats), constructed from blue-colored denim.

Where did the name come from? Jean fabric emerged in the cities of Genoa, Italy, and Nîmes, France. *Gênes*, the French word for Genoa, may be the origin of the word "jeans." In Nîmes, weavers tried to reproduce jean fabric but instead developed a similar twill fabric that became known as denim, from *de Nîmes*, meaning "from Nîmes." Nearly all indigo, needed for dyeing, came from indigo bush plantations in India until the late 1800s. It was replaced by indigo synthesis methods developed in Germany.

Dungaree was mentioned for the first time in the 1600s, as cheap, coarse thick cotton cloth, usually blue but sometimes white, worn by impoverished people in an Indian dockside village called Dongri. This cloth was "dungri" in *Hindi*. Dungri was exported to England and used for manufacturing of cheap, robust working clothes. In English, the word "dungri" became pronounced as "dungaree."

Modern jeans were popularized as casual wear by Marlon Brando and James Dean in their 1950s films, leading to the fabric becoming a symbol of rebellion among teenagers. Historic brands include Levi's, Lee, and Wrangler.

Fashion designer Yves Saint Laurent once said about blue jeans, "They have expression, modesty, sex appeal, simplicity." Since the 1930s, when popular films helped jeans leap from workwear into the wardrobes of Hollywood stars, denim has been understood to stand for rugged individualism, informality and a respect for hard work.

You may find this hard to believe, but historic photographs show that before they became the fashion, jeans generally fit loosely, much like a pair of bib overalls without the bib. Indeed, until 1960, Levi Strauss called them "waist overalls" rather than "jeans."

Ripping or distressing of jeans, though also arising naturally as a result of wear and tear, is sometimes deliberately performed by suppliers—with distressed clothing often selling for more than a non-distressed pair.

Really? Have we become so lazy that we want the manufacturers to wear out our jeans rather than do it ourselves?

US consumers spent more than \$14 billion on jeans in 2004 and \$15 billion in 2005. An analysis firm projects the global jeans market will top \$95 billion dollars by 2030. That's a lot of money for worn-out trousers.

JACK & JILL

"Jack and Jill" is a traditional, English, four-line nursery rhyme which dates to the 1700s. Different verses were later added, with many, many variations. Several theories have been advanced to explain the rhyme's origin.

The earliest version of the rhyme was in a reprint of John Newbery's *Mother Goose's Melody*, first published around 1765. Jill was originally spelled Gill in the earliest version of the rhyme and the accompanying woodcut showed two boys at the foot of the hill.

Jack and Gill went up the hill

To fetch a pail of water;
Jack fell down and broke his crown
And Gill came tumbling after.

Later the spelling was changed to Jill and more verses were added to carry the story further, of which the commonest are:

Up Jack got and home did trot,
As fast as he could caper;
Went to bed to mend his head
With vinegar and brown paper.

Jill came in and she did grin
To see his paper plaster;
Mother, vex'd, did whip her next
For causing Jack's disaster.

The phrase "Jack and Jill" had existed earlier in England to indicate a boy and girl as a generic pair. It is used this way in the proverb "Every Jack (shall/must) have his Jill," which was referred to by Shakespeare in two plays dating from the 1590s. The compress of vinegar and brown paper, by the way, was a common home cure used to heal bruises. Decades later, that cure was changed to "spread all over with sugar and rum."

The story was also popular in America. In *Juvenile Songs*, rewritten and set to music by Fanny E. Lacy (Boston 1852) was a six-stanza version of Jack and Jill. The last part of the poem is devoted to a warning against social climbing: "By this we see that folks should be/ Contented with their station/ And never try to look so high/ Above their situation."

The rhyme has been amazingly popular in the music world. Various musical arrangements of the rhyme have been published (the earliest in 1777). It has been arranged as a Handel aria, a chamber piece for horn and two bassoons, and later reset as a bassoon trio. In 2011, there was even a movie, the comedy, *Jack and Jill*. It spans ten years and chronicles the sibling rivalry between Jack and his sister Jill.

But where does the rhyme originate? It may be related to a story in the 1200s Icelandic Gylfaginning in which the brother and sister, Hjúki and Bil, were stolen by the Moon while drawing water from a well.

Other ideas include a reference to the executions of Richard Empson and Edmund Dudley in 1510, or to a marriage negotiation conducted by Thomas Wolsey in 1514. It has also been taken to satirise the attempt by King Charles I of England to raise extra revenue by ordering that the volume of a Jack (1/8 pint) be reduced, while the tax remained the same. In

consequence of this, the Gill (1/4 pint in liquid measure) "came tumbling after."

We will probably never know the true source and perhaps it never had an actual 'meaning.' Many nursery rhymes originated simply as counting or dancing songs to be sung while children played a game together.

Always in favor of simplicity, I prefer to think of the verse as juvenile dance music.



FEMMES FATALE

"Femme fatale" is a French term that literally translates to "fatal female" or "lethal woman." She is an irresistible, mysterious seductress who uses her beauty and charm to lure men into danger. She may also be called an enchantress, a temptress, a siren, a vamp, or a maneater.

This dangerous lady is an archetype of literature and art and one of the most popular character types seen in 20th century fiction. She embodies beauty, mystery, seduction, and danger. Her role often involves entrapping a man into her web of deceit and ruining him in some way. At times, she works with the main villains and uses the hero for their evil needs. And sometimes, even when she plans to fool or hurt the hero, she is conflicted about her feelings and what she's doing.

My favorite description is this: "They're the kind of dames who can wear floor-length gowns and look completely naked." (James Lileks, in *The Bleat* February 2003)

Part of the appeal of femme fatale characters is that women have not traditionally been seen as mortally dangerous. The idea of a woman who has no interest in motherhood, who only cares about herself, and above all, cannot be controlled, is equal parts alluring and frightening. It's part of what has made her so enduring, even as times change, and the world is no longer full of Sam Spades.

The femme fatale archetype has existed for centuries in the culture, folklore, and myths of many lands. Ancient examples include Lilith, Circe, Medea, Clytemnestra, and Visha Kanyas. Historical examples from classical times include Cleopatra and Messalina, as well as the biblical figures Delilah, Jezebel, and Salome.

She was a common figure in the European Middle Ages, typified by the seductive enchantress, Morgan le Fay. She flourished in the Romantic period in the works of John Keats, notably *La Belle Dame sans Merci* and *Lamia*. This led to her appearing in the work of Edgar Allan Poe and, as the vampire, notably in *Brides of Dracula*.

In the Western culture of the late 19th and early 20th centuries, the femme fatale became a more fashionable trope, and she is found in the paintings of the artists Edvard Munch, Gustav Klimt, Franz von Stuck, and Gustave Moreau. Oscar Wilde wrote a play about her, called *Salome*, in which she manipulates her lust-crazed uncle, King Herod, with her enticing *Dance of the Seven Veils* (Wilde's invention) to agree to her imperious demand,

"bring me the head of John the Baptist."

She also is seen as a prominent figure in late 19th- and 20th-century opera, appearing in such productions as Georges Bizet's *Carmen* and Camille Saint-Saëns' *Samson et Delilah*. Other famous femmes fatales include Isabella of France, Hedda Gabler, Marie Antoinette of Austria, and, most famously, Lucrezia Borgia.

In 20th century genres, an icon is Margaretha Geertruida Zelle. While working as an exotic dancer, she took the stage name Mata Hari. She was accused of German espionage during World War I and was put to death by a French firing squad. After her death she became the subject of many sensational films and books.

Film noir came out around the time of WWII. In these films, the woman seeks the help of the male protagonist, and he complies even if he suspects she's bad news. It's a classic situation as seen in some of the best film noirs of all-time, like *The Maltese Falcon* and *Double Indemnity*. Femmes fatales appear in James Bond films and others, such as *Leave Her to Heaven* and *Rebecca*.

Femmes fatales are perfectly suited to detective fiction, especially in its 'hard-boiled' sub-genre which largely originated with the crime stories of Dashiell Hammett in the 1920s.

From TV Tropes: "First, she turns you on. Then, she turns on you. Dressed all in black with legs up to here and shady motives, she slinks into the P.I.'s office, sometimes holding a cigarette on a long holder, and says someone has killed her husband."

One of the most famous femmes fatales of American television is Audrey Horne of the David Lynch cult series *Twin Peaks*. They also appear frequently in comic books. Notable examples include Batman's long-time nemesis Catwoman, who first appeared in 1940.

In the early 1970s, one of the best Neo-Noir films was *Chinatown*, with Faye Dunaway playing the femme fatale. By the '80s and '90s, the character was still showing up in noir-influenced movies such as *Blade Runner* and *Blue Velvet*.

This character type lives on, and her influence is still felt. She allows for women to be more than just housewives, with strong, alluring, and villainous roles for their characters. So long as film noir continues to influence movies, shows, and video games, you'll keep seeing some version of the femme fatale.

And why not? Imagining that you are a sexy, powerful seductress helps you get through the hours of scrubbing burnt pots and changing dirty diapers.

VAMP

"Vamp" is a popular word, with several meanings.

As a verb, it means:

- to extemporize on a piano, to improvise, 1789
- patch up, repair, piece together
- to concoct or invent (vamp up ugly rumors)

As a noun:

- part of a stocking that covers the foot and ankle, 1200
- upper part of a shoe or boot, covering instep and usually the toes, 1590
- short form of "vampire," 1909
- seductive woman who exploits men, 1915, (from "vampire")
- short introductory (or between verses) musical passage

"Vamp" is the name for various bands, comic strips, films, characters, and at least one novel. Also, there is a Vamp Creek in Manitoba, the *Seattle Vamps* is a women's ice hockey team, and vamp is a slang term for a volunteer firefighter in the US.

The word "vamper" was previously used as a pejorative for men, perhaps shortened from "vampire," indicating dishonest men who stole or cheated through trickery (1864). The verb "revamp" is an American term invented in the 1850s from the existing sense of vamp as patching up or restoring. And, what we now call ankle socks were known in the 1700s as "vampeys."

It's the use of "vamp" to mean a seductive woman that gets the most ink. Rudyard Kipling wrote a long poem called *The Vampire*. Here is a verse that describes such a woman:

A fool there was and he made his prayer
(Even as you and I!)

To a rag and a bone and a hank of hair
(We called her the woman who did not care)

But the fool, he called her his lady fair
(Even as you and I.)

The 1915 film, *A Fool There Was*, is credited with bringing the term vamp into the mainstream after Theda Bara's debut role as *The Vampire* propelled her to stardom. The word was in print in reference to dangerous women within a month of the movie's premiere.

TV Tropes describes a vamp as a "classic character type, the beauty who uses her femininity and her sexuality as a weapon to undermine a moral and upright man, for evil purposes. She's evil and sexy, a liar, a manipulator, and a sneak, and uses the good guy's sympathy against him, often with a sob story about her mother and some hospital bills or a Wounded Gazelle Gambit.

"Expect some Slaying Mantis or Seductive Spider Animal Motifs for some of these characters, as female mantises and spiders have been known to eat their male partners after mating. Indeed, the Black Widow is a particularly successful Vamp, and the Literal Man Eater actually consumes the men she seduces.

"The Heroic Seductress, The Vamp's direct Counter Trope, is a woman who uses sex for noble and heroic purposes. Other counter tropes are The Tease, who uses sex for mischief, and the Proper Lady, who saves it for her own man."

What is a "Wounded Gazelle" gambit? *TV Tropes* didn't say, but the phrase brought a vision to my mind's eye of a slender, very delicate creature with big eyes, a broken leg or something similar, and an innocent expression who desperately needs rescuing or she will end up in the jaws of a lion. Unless, of course, you are soft-hearted enough to rescue her. Whereupon she will turn into a Slaying Mantis.

Well, I don't want to be a vamp, and I don't want to wear vampeys. But I wouldn't mind doing a few riffs on a piano, if I knew how.

WHORE'S BATH

"Whore's bath" is a term used colloquially to describe a quick method of personal hygiene that involves washing only the face, underarms, and groin, instead of taking a full shower or bath. It's commonly known as washing only your "pits, tits, and slits" or "pits, tits, and naughty bits" in the bathroom sink. The idea is to save time.

The etymology of the phrase is in dispute, but many a World War II veteran says it was in common usage during that war. When a soldier was either constantly under fire or without access to the proper facilities, the whore's bath served to preserve the soldier's dignity and comfort. He typically performed it by cleaning his armpits, genitalia, and anus (in that order), using his helmet as a basin.

Though the origin of whore's bath is disputed, the phrase itself signals what is likely the source, the brief cleaning that prostitutes perform between clients. The term is informal and may be considered offensive or derogatory.

A synonym is "spit bath." That doesn't mean washing yourself with saliva but with so little water that it's the size of a spit.

Being adequately bathed is civilized. Which is probably why the oldest of civilizations created bath houses. Archaeologists list the Great Bath of Mohenjo-daro as one of the earliest public baths in history. Located in Sindh, Pakistan, the bath dates to the ancient Indus Valley Civilization, 3000 BCE, one of the three oldest human civilizations, next to ancient Egypt and Mesopotamia.

"The Whore's Bath" is the title of a song and also of a painting by an American artist who seems to have international connections: *The Whore's Bath - La Bain de la Pute*.

WHITE LADY

A "white lady" (or woman in white) is a kind of female ghost found in folklore. She typically wears a white dress and is associated with the legends of tragedy found in countries around the world. Common to most of these tales is accidental death, murder, or suicide, and themes of loss, betrayal by a husband or fiancé, and unrequited love.

In popular medieval legend, a White Lady is fabled to appear by day as well as by night in a house in which a family member is soon to die. They also appear within photos just before or after death and were regarded as the ghosts of deceased ancestors.

Some of these legends are based on real people, such as Perchta of Rožmberk (c. 1429-1476) in the Czech Republic, and the countess Kunigunda of Orlamünde, in Germany. In the Netherlands, however, white women show many similarities with the banshee, the fairy, and the elf. They abduct or switch newborns, abduct women, and punish people who have mistreated them. As benevolent beings, they may aid in childbirth or offer good advice.

Thirteen tales within England suggest that the White Lady may be a victim of murder or suicide who died before she could tell anyone the location of some hidden treasure. In Wales, she is also associated with restless spirits guarding hidden treasures.

Other legends are quite modern. One from the Philippines and another from Serbia arose from stories of women who died in automobile accidents. In the United States, there are several tales of white ladies, originating in New York state, Virginia, Connecticut, Pennsylvania, California, and Texas, many of them arising from events in the last century.

Another version of the White Lady is "La Llorona." She is also known as "The Crying Woman" or "The Wailer." La Llorona is a vengeful ghost who is said to roam near bodies of water mourning her children whom she drowned in a jealous rage after discovering her husband was cheating on her. The legend of La Llorona is traditionally told throughout Mexico, Central America and northern South America and the legend has a wide variety of details and versions. Evidence exists to show that the lore is pre-Hispanic. However, La Llorona is most commonly associated with the colonial era and the dynamic between Spanish conquistadores and indigenous women. The earliest documentation of La Llorona is traced back to 1550 in Mexico City.

The Woman in White is the fifth published novel by Wilkie Collins, written in 1859 and set in 1849/50. The story can be seen as an early example of detective fiction with the protagonist employing many of the sleuthing techniques of later private detectives and the author using multiple narrators. A theme of the story is the unequal position of married women in law at the time.

Pursuing questions of identity and insanity along the paths and corridors of English country houses and the madhouse, *The Woman in White* is the first and most influential of the Victorian genre that combined Gothic horror with psychological realism.

In 2003, Robert McCrum, writing for *The Observer*, listed *The Woman in White* number 23 in "the top 100 greatest novels of all time," and the novel was listed at number 77 on the BBC's survey *The Big Read*.

Modern critics and readers regard it as Collins's best novel, a view with which Collins concurred, as it is the only one of his novels named in his chosen epitaph, "Author of *The Woman in White* and other works of fiction." It has been adapted for theater several times, the latest, according to Wikipedia, in 2005.

A close friend of Charles Dickens, William Wilkie Collins was one of the best known, best loved, and, for a time, best paid of Victorian fiction writers. Now, Collins is being given more critical and popular attention than he has received for 50 years. His novel *The Moonstone*, is seen by many as the first true detective novel. T. S. Eliot called it "the first, the longest, and the best of modern English detective novels."

The final White Lady is a classic cocktail that is made with gin, Cointreau or Triple Sec, fresh lemon juice and an optional egg white. It belongs to the sidecar family, made with gin in place of brandy. The cocktail sometimes also includes additional ingredients, for example egg white, sugar, cream, or

creme de menthe.

I can see myself now, curled up in a cozy armchair, with a White Lady cocktail to sip, *The Woman in White* to read, and my fingers crossed that nobody is going to haunt me.

WORLDLY WOMAN

A "woman of the world" (*femme du monde* in French) is knowledgeable and sophisticated in the ways and manners of the world, especially the world of society. She is well-traveled, has lived through many experiences and gained a lot of wisdom in the process. The phrase was first recorded in 1570-80.

In literature, "worldly woman" has often, in the past, been a euphemistic insult, implying that she is a floozy or tramp. Do you suppose a worldly man should be called a "flooze"?

The ultimate worldly woman, of course, is a Renaissance woman.

The term "Renaissance man," or polymath, developed between the 1300s and 1600s, when culture, art, politics, and the economy enjoyed a rebirth. One of its most-accomplished representatives, Leon Battista Alberti, said that "a man can do all things if he will." Alberti himself was an accomplished architect, painter, classicist, poet, scientist, mathematician, and horseman. The most famous example is Leonardo da Vinci (1452-1519), whose gifts were manifest in the fields of art, science, music, invention, and writing. It was he who said, "Learning never exhausts the mind."

A Renaissance woman, therefore, is a woman who is interested in and knows a lot about many things. She is knowledgeable, educated, or proficient in a wide range of fields, especially the arts and sciences. If "Renaissance" seems too historical a word, consider some synonyms: polymath, intellectual, brain, wizard, thinker, brainiac, genius, virtuoso, and, of course, nerd.

Although many women have achieved great things across multiple fields (including ruling countries) and meet the definition of a polymath, the number formally acclaimed is far fewer than for men. Historically, the expectation that female roles were limited to marriage and children, combined with the lack of access to a broad education excluded many women from following academic fields. And, undoubtedly, there were many whose brilliance was not documented. Despite this, there is a rich history of women who should be recognized and celebrated for the polymaths they were.

The attitude of such women can be summed up by this quote from Emma Watson, "I want to be a Renaissance Woman. I want to paint, and I want to write, and I want to act, and I just want to do everything."



MISCELLANY ONE

ADD INSULT TO INJURY

To "add insult to injury" is to act in a way that makes a bad or awkward situation worse. It's often emotional, such as when a person not only suffers a misfortune but then gets mocked or criticized for it.

The idea reminds me of Murphy's First Law: "Anything that can go wrong will go wrong." But these familiar synonyms are perhaps more apt:

- Rub salt in the wound
- Kick someone when they're down
- Add fuel to the fire
- Pour oil on the flames
- Twist the knife

An example is one of my adventures in the kitchen. The ounce of butter that I needed for a recipe, already soft and determined to thwart me, slid off the spoon and landed on the floor. I scooped another ounce and managed to put it in the microwave to melt, while I cleaned the kitchen floor. But I'd forgotten to put a lid on the container and the butter exploded all over the microwave. Then I had to clean the microwave. It will not, perhaps, be surprising to learn that I decided the recipe didn't need any butter.

"Add insult to injury" is ancient. In fact, it dates at least as far back as the Roman writer, Phaedrus, who lived around 15 BCE to 50 CE. It may be much older than Phaedrus, since it encapsulates a common human event. But the source we have is his translation of Aesop's fable, *The Bald Man and the Fly*.

In the story, a bald man is bitten on the head by a fly. In trying to swat the fly, he misses and ends up bonking himself very hard on the head. The fly laughs and says, "You wanted to avenge the mere prick of a tiny little insect with death. What then will you do to yourself, who have added insult to injury?"

The man replied that he would not take revenge on himself, since he had not intended harm. But he said, "You shameful animal of a scorned race, who delighted to drink human blood, I would choose to be rid of you even with a greater inconvenience to myself."

I can certainly empathize since I feel the same way about mosquitoes.

Not all later writers translated the Latin phrase as "added insult to injury." But this modern version was used in *The Foundling* (1747), the first stage

play by the English writer Edward Moore.

ALL SWEETNESS AND LIGHT

The phrase "all sweetness and light" describes a person who is agreeable, reasonable, untroubled, and peaceful, sometimes to an exaggerated degree. Or, if we take a broader view, it can mean social or political harmony. It would be nice to have more of that.

"Sweetness and light" is often used in common speech, sometimes with mild irony. For example, "The two had been fighting for a month, but around others it was all sweetness and light." A comment that might apply in business: "Anyone expecting the project to be sweetness and light from beginning to end is naïve." On the home front, this statement will be common: "That's just toddlers for you—horrible temper tantrums one moment, sweetness and light the next."

Originally, "sweetness and light" had a special use in literary criticism meaning "pleasing and instructive," which in classical theory was the aim and justification of poetry.

Jonathan Swift first used the phrase in his mock-heroic prose satire, *The Battle of the Books* (1704), a defense of Classical learning. It gained widespread currency in the Victorian era, when English poet and essayist Matthew Arnold picked it up as the title of the first section of his 1869 book *Culture and Anarchy: An Essay in Political and Social Criticism*, where "sweetness and light" stands for beauty and intelligence, the two key components of an excellent culture.

Nowadays, the phrase is usually used to indicate merely a friendly demeanor or a pleasant situation. But it's often used ironically to describe someone whose smile is totally insincere.

I'm all sweetness and light. But only after the first two hits of java in the morning.

ALL WOOL AND A YARD WIDE

The phrase "all wool and a yard wide" means "cloth of the finest quality" and is now used to describe people who are genuine, honorable, and trustworthy.

It originated around 1880. The *Cassell Dictionary of Slang* suggests it might have been used in advertising copy for clothing trade promotions.

This idiom may have originated as separate expressions — "all wool" and "a yard wide."

"All wool" was popular during the American Civil War (1861-65) and referred to excellent quality. If a uniform was all wool, it was good quality. But many uniforms were made of inferior cloth which contained only a little wool and were inclined to fall apart rather quickly.

"A yard wide" was also used in this context, and it literally referred to the width of the cloth used to make the uniforms. A single piece of wool used to make clothing was a yard wide; shabbier uniforms were sometimes made of cloth that wasn't a full yard wide and therefore had to be pieced together.

Another version of this phrase is, "All wool and no shoddy" is another version of the phrase. "Shoddy," which is a clothing trade term, is a cheap semi-felted material made from recycled rags and a small percentage of real wool. Uniform coats made from it tended to come apart quickly.

I'd like to think of myself as "all wool and a yard wide" but couldn't that be changed to "all wool and a foot wide"?

BEAUTY IS IN THE EYE OF THE BEHOLDER

This means that beauty cannot be judged objectively, for what one person finds beautiful or admirable may seem ugly to another. It applies not just to beauty we see with our eyes but to anything we apprehend with our senses: the smell of the ocean, the sound of wind in the treetops, the feel of snakes' skin, the taste of honey, the pleasure of poetry.

On a slightly different slant, Confucius is credited with saying, "Everything has its beauty, but not everyone sees it."

"Beauty is in the eye of the beholder" first appeared in the 3rd century BCE in Greek and in different forms over the centuries. It appeared in English in its current form in 1878, in the novel *Molly Bawn*, by Margaret Wolfe Hungerford, who wrote many books, often under the pseudonym of 'The Duchess.'

Benjamin Franklin, in *Poor Richard's Almanack*, 1741, wrote:
Beauty, like supreme dominion,
is but supported by opinion.

David Hume's *Essays, Moral and Political*, 1742, include:
"Beauty in things exists merely in the mind which contemplates them."

So, can I say that music is in the ear of the hearer?

AT SOMEONE'S BECK AND CALL

If you're "at someone's back and call," you're always ready to do what that person asks. The term can carry a connotation of subservience and lower status. "He expects his employees to be at his beck and call day and night."

The word "beck" is rarely used in English anymore. It's originally a 1300s abbreviation of "beckon," which means to signal silently, by a nod or motion of the hand or finger, indicating a request or command. And a "call" is made in a loud, distinct voice to get someone's attention.

"Beckon call" is an eggcorn, or a mishearing of the original phrase. It's easy to understand why people make this error: "beckon" sounds a lot like "beck and." It is also sometimes seen in print, but it makes no sense grammatically.

The first recorded use of 'beck and call' that we know of in print is in Aemilia Lanyer's set of poems *Salve Deus Rex Judaeorum*, 1611:

The Muses doe attend upon your Throne,
With all the Artists at your becke and call.

"Beck and call" is also the name of a mixed drink. Who knew?

BUSY AS A ONE-ARMED PAPERHANGER

"Busy as a one-armed paperhanger" means you are frantically busy.

If you've ever hung wallpaper, you know the pace can get very intense when you've spread the wallpaper paste and then have to hoist it up a ladder to the corner of the ceiling to hang it on the wall. It's tricky to get the paper perfectly lined up with the vertical plumb line, and get it glued evenly to the wall, without bubbles or lumps. And it must be done in a short time, before the paste dries. It's tricky enough when you have two arms!

The phrase dates from the early 1900s and was coined in the USA. Originally, it was a longer expression: "as busy as a one-armed paperhanger with the hives." Doesn't that sound like overkill?

Here are some other picturesque phrases for bustling activity:

- as busy as the devil in a high wind
- as busy as a hen with one chick
- busy as a bee (or beaver)
- busier than a one-legged man in an ass-kicking contest

—busier than flies in a tar pit
—busier than a one-eyed cat watching three mice holes

And, to indicate the opposite, total relaxation:

—busier than a pickpocket in a nudist camp
—busy as a hibernating bear.

FOR WANT OF A NAIL

"For want of a nail" is a proverb, warning us that a major catastrophe can often be traced back to a tiny error. The lack of a small, basic part can lead from one unwanted, unexpected consequence to a larger one, and to yet another one, and so on, as in a stack of falling dominos.

It's also known as a ripple effect. And, if you like longer words, call it a parable of exponentially cascading consequences. In modern stories, it is usually referred to as the butterfly effect.

Probably the most well-known full version is the one which appeared in Benjamin Franklin's *Poor Richard's Almanac* (1758):

For want of a nail, the shoe was lost;
For want of a shoe, the horse was lost;
For want of a horse, the rider was lost;
For want of a rider, the message was lost;
For want of the message, the battle was lost;
For want of a battle, the kingdom was lost,
And all for the want of a horseshoe nail.

The earliest surviving reference in English is by John Gower in the late 1300s in his poem *Confessio Amantis* (The Lover's Confession). The poet George Herbert included it in his 1640 collection of aphorisms.

Some sources say it's a reference to Richard III of England's defeat at the Battle of Bosworth Field in 1485. But those sources weren't paying attention; that battle was a hundred years later than the first appearance of the proverb in print. Also, so the tale goes, Richard's horse did not lose a shoe but got stuck in the mud.

During World War II, this verse was framed and hung on the wall of the Anglo-American Supply Headquarters in London to remind everyone of the importance of seemingly trivial repair parts and inventory replenishment.

A similar proverb is "a chain is only as strong as its weakest link." This first appeared in Thomas Reid's *Essays on the Intellectual Powers of Man*, published in 1786.

One could also say, "the devil is in the details." And that's an idiom which means even the grandest project depends on the success of the smallest components.

I get the message. If I'm going to walk down two flights of stairs, up the driveway, and then three blocks to catch a bus downtown to pick up my mail, I'd better remember to take the post office box keys.

LAST OF THE BIG-TIME SPENDERS

"Last of the big-time spenders" is a sarcastic term for a tightwad. It originated in the US during the 1920s, perhaps referring to the lavish extravagances of the boom preceding the Great Depression.

The adjective "big-time," meaning significant or impressive, may be a coinage from vaudeville days, when the major theater circuits were referred to as "the big time." A 1927 article in *Vanity Fair*, for example, said: "For the vaudeville branch of the show business *Variety* coined such famous colloquialisms as 'Big Time' and 'Small Time,' differentiating the first-rate circuits from the second rate."

In a literal sense, the phrase "last of the big-time spenders" means someone who spends lavish amounts of money. But it's often used humorously or ironically to describe someone who's stingy. Eric Partridge's *A Dictionary of Catch Phrases* (1992) describes "last of the big-time spenders" as playfully ironic.

In late 1960, a comic song entitled "Last of the Big-Time Spenders," by Cornbread and the Biscuits, appeared on Billboard magazine's "Hot Hundred" chart.

Cornbread and biscuits? My mouth is watering.

More recently, the title was given to a poignant ballad written by Billy Joel and recorded on his album *Streetlife Serenade* (1974).

As for "big spender," the earliest example we've found is from an article about the gambling industry that ran in the December 1907 issue of *The Scrap Book*. After this, uses of "big spender" became common.

As for the last of the big-time spenders, perhaps I qualify. At least, that's what I called myself last Sunday when my coffee buddy showed surprise at my offering to pay for his donut.

ON A WING AND A PRAYER

This idiom means that you're in a difficult situation, relying on meager resources and luck to get out of it.

The phrase was born in the turbulent times of World War II. In a 1942 film called *The Flying Tigers*, John Wayne's character says, "Any word on that flight yet?" And a hotel clerk replies, "Yes sir, it was attacked and fired on by Japanese aircraft. She's coming in on one wing and a prayer."

It was also used in a 1943 song, *Coming in on a Wing and a Prayer*, by Harold Adamson and Jimmy McHugh, inspired by a real event. A damaged plane managed to return home safely, and the phrase perfectly captured the mixture of luck, faith and resilience that allowed such a happy ending.

The allusion to a stricken aircraft limping home may have been influenced by the earlier term 'winging it,' which refers to actors struggling through parts that they have recently learned in the wings of a theater.

ON THE WAGON

If you're "on the wagon," you're staying sober, abstaining from alcohol or drugs. The suggestion is that you're drinking water instead.

The first reference found in print is from Alice Caldwell Hegan's comic novel *Mrs. Wiggs of the Cabbage Patch*, published in 1901.

This expression is a shortening of "on the water wagon," or "on the water cart," referring to the horse-drawn water tanks once used to spray dirt roads to keep down the dust. The antonym, "off the wagon," used for a resumption of drinking, dates from the same period. B.J. Taylor used it in *Extra Dry* (1906). "It is better to have been on and off the wagon than never to have been on at all."

There are several theories about where the term originated. A common one was part of the "Life in the 1500s" internet hoax, which said that back in the days when horse-drawn vehicles were the only way to get around, condemned prisoners being taken to jail were offered a last drink, and then transported to the gallows "on the wagon."

Snopes says this one is false. Very little kindness was shown to those under sentence of death; they were jeered at by the crowd on their way to the scaffold, and their hangings were a source of entertainment to the thousands who gathered to watch them die.

Another story has it that Evangeline Booth, the US Salvation Army National

Commander, toured the Bowery slums in a wagon, picking up drunks and delivering them to sobriety. The phrase pre-dates Booth's work in New York, so that can't be the origin.

A third theory suggests that "on the wagon" is a variant of "on the bandwagon," a term that means "to publicly identify oneself with a particular political movement or social cause." Politicians used to campaign by parading the streets in banner-festooned wagons filled with musical bands loudly playing. Local people with an axe to grind would make a large show of leaping onto the bandwagon and waving to the crowd from there. Both terms have core meanings of proclaiming strong personal stances about someone or something.

Long before Prohibition, there was a grassroots movement to temper the perceived evils of alcohol. Organizations like the Anti-Saloon League persuaded members to pledge their eternal sobriety to develop better character and set a good example. Because horse-drawn water tanks were common, they became a kind of reference point for those discussing their commitment to sobriety. People said they'd sooner drink from the water wagon than accept alcohol. This may have evolved into proclaiming that a person was "on the water wagon."

I favor the last explanation, though not Prohibition, which made lots of gangsters very rich and some of them very dead.

ONE FOR THE ROAD

"One for the road" is a final drink, usually an alcoholic one, before leaving to go home or on a journey. It originated early in the 1900s.

One theory suggests that this phrase derives from the supposed practice of offering condemned felons a final drink at a pub on the way to public execution in London, but this is part of the "Life in the 1500s" hoax that hit the internet in 2010. However, according to *Snopes*, wagons bearing prisoners to Tyburn did not stop at taverns along the way, thus avoiding the risk of those condemned to death trying to escape.

Back in the days of Tyburn, food outlets would have been few and far between. If travelers wanted to eat on their journey, they had to take their food with them. Whatever provision one made for one's journey was said to be "for the road."

The first uses of "one for the road," in which the "one" is always an alcoholic drink, are found in print in the 1930s. An early example is found in the *Edinburgh Evening News*, August 1939, in a report on a debate in the British House of Parliament.

One etymologist believes the term originated with traveling salesmen who applied it either to one last drink after a night's carousing or to one more drink before they literally set out "on the road" to see more customers.

It is customary when out with friends to be persuaded to have "one for the road" as a way of delaying the parting, under the guise of needing one final infusion of booze to fend off the cold on the way home. The Royal Navy has a derivative of this phrase, "One for the gangway."

Maybe my last drink at a party should be called "one for the stairs," since, once I reach home, I have to climb stairs to get to my bed.



SHRINKAGE

"Shrinkage" is the word I like to use when referring to psychology.

It has been said that the most important study is the study of man. This doesn't mean we are important in the whole scheme of things. It merely means there is a desperate need to find out what makes us tick because our emotional and mental progress is so very far behind that of our technology.

For that reason, "psychology," the name for the scientific study of the human mind and behavior, is very important.

The word "psychology" derives from the Greek word *psyche*, for spirit or soul. The earliest known reference in English was in 1694. The ancient civilizations of Egypt, Greece, China, India, and Persia all engaged in the philosophical study of the mind. As early as the 4th century BCE, the Greek physician Hippocrates theorized that mental disorders had physical rather than supernatural causes.

So, why are psychologists, psychiatrists, and therapists called "shrinks"? Research indicates that they started it themselves. In 1882, William James, an American philosopher and psychologist, described how he could not remember what happened while under hypnosis. He described this as "like having your brain shrunk."

In 1895, Dr. George Beard used the phrase "shrinking violets" to describe people who were so sensitive that their emotions caused them to cry uncontrollably. It was believed that these people's brains were too small for their bodies. In another word, "shrunk."

In 1898, Sigmund Freud published *The Interpretation of Dreams* and in it, referred to the interpretation of dreams as being like "shrinking a person's brain."

Of course, the label might have come from "head shrinkage," the ancient practice of shrinking the head of a conquered enemy. And not always so ancient. In 1949, a film was released about the Jivaro Amazonian Tribe being observed in Peru and Ecuador. The tribe had a tradition of head shrinking that was common among Amazonian tribes.

In popular culture, the first use of "headshrinker" or "shrink" in the mainstream media was in a 1950 issue of *Time* magazine which stated that anyone who predicted the success of the spaghetti western *Hopalong Cassidy* should be sent to a headshrinker. In a footnote, the author had to

explain the usage of "headshrinker" as a term for a psychiatrist, signaling that the term was new at the time.

There's no profession that doesn't get a slangy label or two. "Shrinkage" works for me because psychologists try to shrink your problems. Also, "shrink" is easier to spell than psychiatry.

Many ordinary people indulge in folk (or "pop") psychology to understand the mental states and behaviors of the people around them. I do this all the time because, as a writer, I need to know what makes people "tick." Besides, I'm curious.

Perhaps some quotes are in order.

Man is a rational animal. He can think up a reason for anything he wants to believe.

— Anatole France, 1844-1924, French writer, Nobel 1921

The concept of "mental health" in our society is defined largely by the extent to which an individual behaves in accord with the needs of the system and does so without showing signs of stress.

— Theodore Kaczynski

The writer has a difficult life. For, as Graham Greene once noted in a different context, most of us are born three drinks short of being able to face reality.

— Mordecai Richler

MASLOW'S HAMMER

"If the only tool you have is a hammer, you tend to see every problem as a nail."

This famous quote by Abraham Maslow refers to a concept known as Maslow's Hammer. It refers to an over-reliance on a familiar or favourite tool. While such tools can be very useful at times, over-reliance can result in problems.

The English expression "a Birmingham screwdriver," meaning a hammer, refers to the practice of using the one tool for all purposes, and predates Maslow by at least a century.

The first recorded statement of the concept was Abraham Kaplan's, in 1964: "Give a small boy a hammer, and he will find that everything he encounters needs pounding." Kaplan urged scientists to exercise good judgment in the selection of appropriate methods for their research. Just because a method

happens to be handy, or you're used to it, is no assurance that the method is appropriate for all problems.

In his 2003 book, *Of Paradise and Power*, historian Robert Kagan suggested a corollary to the law: "When you don't have a hammer, you don't want anything to look like a nail."

The term, "a golden hammer," a familiar technology or concept applied obsessively to many software problems, was introduced as a programming practice to be avoided.

I suppose that means I should try new recipes for brownies now and then.

FOMO

"FOMO" is an acronym for "fear of missing out" on interesting or enjoyable activities as well as on business opportunities. It's a form of social anxiety, often aroused by posts seen on social media websites.

Social networking sites offer views on an endless stream of activities in which a person is not involved. FOMO is also present in video games, investing, and business marketing. It's associated with worsening depression and anxiety, and a lowered quality of life.

FOMO is the "bandwagon effect," where an individual may see another person do something and assumes it must be important because everyone is doing it.

Patrick J. McGinnis popularized the term FOMO while writing for the *Harbus*, the magazine of Harvard Business School. The phenomenon was first identified in 1996 by marketing strategist Dr. Dan Herman. Before the Internet, a related phenomenon, "keeping up with the Joneses," was widely experienced.

FOMO may influence long-term goals and self-perceptions. In a study, around half of the respondents stated that they are overwhelmed by the amount of information needed to stay up-to-date, and that it is impossible not to miss out on something.

Advertising and marketing campaigns sometimes seek to intensify FOMO within various marketing strategies. Examples include AT&T's "Don't be left behind" campaign and Duracell's Powermat "Stay in charge" campaign.

Naturally, FOMO gave birth to a few similar acronyms.

FOBO — Fear of Better Options. Too many choices are available.

FOMOMO — Fear of the Mystery of Missing Out. Extreme angst that occurs when your mobile device is unusable, and you can't see what you're missing on social media.

FOJI — Fear of Joining In. The fear of posting on social media in case nobody will want to connect, follow, or be friends with you.

JOMO — Joy of Missing Out. A belief that cutting off all social media can be blissful.

FOBIA — Fear of Being Ignored Altogether. A need to maintain an online presence to feel validated as a human being.

I think I'll just ask fo' mo' cream in my coffee.

KEEPING UP WITH THE JONESES

The idiom "keeping up with the Joneses" means using your neighbors as a benchmark for social class or material goods. Failing to "keep up with the Joneses" is perceived as being inferior.

The phrase originated with the comic strip *Keeping Up with the Joneses*, created in 1913. The strip ran until 1940 and depicted the social climbing McGinis family, who struggle to "keep up" with their neighbors, the Joneses of the title.

The idea for the comic strip might have come from humorist Mark Twain's words in 1901. "The outside influences are always pouring in upon us, and we are always obeying their orders and accepting their verdicts. The Smiths like the new play; the Joneses go to see it, and they copy the Smith verdict."

Social status once depended on one's family name. However, social mobility and the rise of consumerism meant that people became more inclined to define themselves by what they possessed and the quest for higher status accelerated. Conspicuous consumption and materialism have been an insatiable juggernaut ever since.

Jones is currently the fifth most common surname in the US. Wouldn't it be hard to keep up with that many people?

CABIN FEVER

"Cabin fever" describes the irritability, restlessness, and other symptoms of claustrophobia resulting from periods of monotony and long isolation in a

small space. The term originated in the early 1800s in the US, a time when pioneers spent long winters in their cabins. Another term meaning the same thing is "stir-crazy."

Long winters in log cabins aren't the only cause of cabin fever. It can be experienced in submarines, on lighthouses and ships, on space stations, in prisons, or under martial law, anywhere a person feels trapped.

Cabin fever is not itself a disease and there is no diagnosis. However, there are cases of "cabin fever" that are diagnosed as mid-winter depression, or seasonal affective disorder (SAD). A person may experience sleepiness or sleeplessness, have a distrust of anyone they are with, or have an urge to go outside even in adverse conditions such as poor weather or limited visibility.

The concept is also invoked humorously to indicate simple boredom from being home alone for an extended time. Or we could, I guess, describe it as the common disease of overwhelming domesticity.

In fiction, these symptoms are usually even more exaggerated, to the point of the character becoming a raving lunatic who is a danger to both himself and others. The concept of cabin fever was used as a theme in Fyodor Dostoevsky's 1866 novel *Crime and Punishment*, and the 1980 horror film *The Shining*. The 2019 psychological horror film *The Lighthouse* depicts the story of two lighthouse keepers who start to lose their sanity when a storm strands them on the remote island where they are stationed.

One source assured me that therapy for cabin fever is as simple as "getting out and interacting with nature directly." That comment made me laugh. I grew up on a homestead in northern Canada, with no telephone or cleared roads. It's said of such country that the climate is ten months winter and two months poor sledding, but it wasn't that bad. We usually had six months of winter, when the only way of getting off the farm was with a team of horses and a cutter. We went out and interacted with nature every day, because we had to feed and water livestock. But when the temperature was minus 40, we didn't interact any longer than necessary.

GO OPEN LOOP

The phrase "go open loop" is slang used to describe someone having a tantrum. "Man, he went open loop! He was yelling, throwing stuff around his office."

Closed-loop and open-loop are terms originating in engineering and electronics. In any system, results which influence further actions constitute a "closed loop." If the results do not directly influence further input, you have an "open loop." These phrases have been around at least since the

dawn of computer science.

The human brain, especially the emotional limbic system, is an open-loop system because its growth and development are influenced by outside input. This is in comparison to a “closed-loop” system like the circulatory system which regulates itself with no help from the outside world.

The term "open-loop" is being used in pop psychology. Naturally, none of us is completely open or closed emotionally. Those who tend to be closed-loop resist change. Those who are open-loop are open to new ideas, new experiences.

—The Hamster Wheel: If you can't concentrate during the day or lie awake at night thinking about all the things you didn't get done and all the things you've made commitments for, you have too many open loops in your life. Our stubborn brains tend to remember and focus on incomplete tasks more than on completed tasks.

There are three recommended ways of closing those nagging loops:

1. Make a list. This usually removes the items from going round and round in your mind.
2. Two-minute rule. If a task would take only two minutes, just do it.
3. Delegate. Relinquishing control can be hard, but also worthwhile.

—Stories: Fiction, whether in the form of books or TV shows is addictive because of the mastery of “the open loop.” Readers keep reading because of "open loops," all the questions they want answered, all the plot lines they want resolved in the story. Writers call it "suspense."

—Conversation: An open loop is a subject which you leave open as you switch to a different topic. For example, you say, "I saw a great movie at the Capital Theater last week. By the way, have you been there lately? What do you think of the renovations?" If the subject of renovations dries up, you can flip back to the movie you saw. An open loop is a kind of cliffhanger. When a conversation dies, they let you smoothly switch back to an earlier line of conversation you opened and left unconcluded.

I'm open to new experiences. My cat, however, is closed-loop. "Feed me now. Feed me now. Feed me now."



GAMES

As a noun, the word "game" means an entertaining activity or sport, especially one played by children, though I think that adults play just as many. A game is often competitive and played according to rules and decided by skill, knowledge, strength, or luck.

As a verb, "to game" means to manipulate someone, or to play video and computer games.

As an adjective, "game" means amenable, glad, ready, inclined, or willing. "I'm always game for a beer."

Attested as early as 2600 BCE, games are a universal part of human experience and present in all cultures. Notable in Western history were the games held in the Circus Maximus in ancient Rome, where men squared off against lions.

Over the centuries, we have created thousands of games. Some of them are also considered to be work (such as spectator sports or games) or art (such as jigsaw puzzles or games involving an artistic layout such as Mah-jong, solitaire, or some video games).

Games are often played or watched purely for enjoyment, but also for achievement or reward. These days, people who play professional sports, such as hockey, football, or golf, sometimes make enormous amounts of money.

Games generally involve mental or physical stimulation, and often both. Many games help develop practical skills, serve as a form of exercise, or otherwise perform an educational, relaxing, or psychological role.

All I know is that in cribbage, a Jack counts one point, and in poker, a Smith & Wesson beats four aces.

THE ONLY GAME IN TOWN

"The only game in town" means the best, the most important, the only thing available or only possible choice in a situation. This American term, dating from the early 1900s, arose from the story of a gambler in a strange town. Eager to play, he joined a gambling game despite knowing it was rigged because it was the only one available in town.

The earliest appearance of this story, and of the phrase "the only game in

town," appears to be from *The Kansas City Star* of Sunday 15th July 1894.

I'm not a gambler but when I'm sleepy, the only game in town is a nap, which costs nothing, is never rigged, and is even calorie-free.

FORE (GOLF)

Golfers yell "fore!" to warn other people on the course that there is a ball heading in their direction. "Fore" is a short version of "watch out ahead" or "watch out before." The warning is necessary because a golf ball, though it weighs only 1.6 or 1.7 ounces, travels at about 180 miles per hour and packs a heavy wallop. This is one of the first things that every beginner learns. Naturally, ducking when you hear another golfer yelling "fore!" is pretty important, too.

The etymology of the word in this usage is uncertain. The Merriam-Webster dictionary pegs the beginning of the golf use of 'fore' to 1878. But a website devoted to Scottish golf history cites a golf glossary published in 1857 that included 'fore.' So, we can assume that its use predates that 1857 mention by at least a couple of decades.

It may have been a contraction of the Gaelic cry *Faugh a Ballagh!* (Clear the way!) which is still associated with the sport of road bowling which has features similar to golf.

Or, and this is more likely, 'fore!' may be an abbreviation of 'forecaddie.' In the 1700's and 1800's, a forecaddie was someone hired by golf courses or golfers to keep track of where balls landed. This was done partly for safety reasons, but also because, in the early days of golf, golf balls were handmade, always custom-ordered and, therefore, expensive. Losing a golf ball was a hit to the wallet well into the 1800s, making the forecaddie's role even more important to golfers. Nowadays this position is called a spotter.

The third theory is that the term has a military origin. In warfare of the 17th and 18th centuries (a time when golf was becoming very popular in Britain), infantry would advance in formation while artillery batteries fired from behind, over the heads of the infantrymen. An artilleryman about to fire would yell "beware before," alerting nearby infantrymen to drop to the ground to avoid the shells screaming overhead. And, time being of the essence, there's little doubt that "Beware before" got shortened to "Fore."

Thus, in modern day golf, one of the first rules taught to young golfers, out of respect to other golfers on the course as well as to the spectators, is always to yell "Fore!" any time their errant shots could potentially hit someone. On the other side of the equation, golfers and spectators hearing the warning learn to duck and cover.

For example, we four friends had the foresight to flee for the forecastle when a golfer on the ocean liner's golf course hollered, "Fore!"

IT'S JUST A GAME

People who say, "it's just a game" are implying that it doesn't matter. The comment is dismissive. They're saying the game is unimportant and you shouldn't take it so seriously.

Everybody knows it's just a game. But in a multiplayer game, you have a moral responsibility not to spoil it for other people. Which means that you play your best, pay attention to teamwork, and refrain from getting blind drunk.

It's true that winning or losing a game is not going to destroy the world or create a new one. It's usually true that no one's life depends on the outcome of a game. No wars will be lost or won; no new planets discovered.

But that's not the point. We play games for fun. Many of us invest a lot of time, effort, and money into learning and playing games. Naturally, whether the prize is a trophy or the pleasure we get from playing our best, we want to win. A player who doesn't try to win, or at least to play as well as he can, is debasing the quality of the contest.

That phrase can raise some powerful emotions. I once had a bridge partner who made some incredibly stupid mistakes. Well, that happens, and I ignored them. The final one, before we parted forever, was in the bidding. I opened, and despite having more than half the points in the deck, she passed. I took all thirteen tricks, a grand slam, which is a challenge and a triumph that doesn't come around often.

When I called her on it, she shrugged, said, "It's just a game!" and walked away. She had just told me that it wasn't important to play well, perhaps that it was even a waste of time. She had told me, in effect, that I was stupid to even mention it. Perhaps she regarded the cards as merely an organized background for gossip. I guess I'll never know.

Whatever she thought, there were a couple of minutes there when I wanted to rearrange her coffee so that it dripped off her eyebrows. The extent of my shock over her attitude is evident because that game happened more than thirty years ago. I could not then, and still can't, imagine anyone being so dismissive of the principles of the game and the natural desire to play well and win.

None of us likes having our feelings flippantly minimized or being told that

we're being irrational and therefore have no reason to be upset. But my ex-partner may have been simply striking out at me for criticizing her play.

Saying that 'it's just a game' is sometimes good advice, though. If a person played the best he or she could but lost anyway, and is crying about it, the comment is fine. But it needs to be stated differently. "Okay, well, you/we lost this one, but next time you/we will do better." Some people often laser-focus on a single round or game and such a comment, without being dismissive of the whole game or disrespecting anyone's commitment, reminds them to pull back, reset, and relax. It doesn't ignore their frustration but tries to provide perspective and help them to dismiss this one game themselves.

There's not a thing I can do about old wars or new planets, but I can play games and focus all my concentration on trying to do them right.

And, always fascinated by how rock bands name themselves, I have to add that "Just a Game" is the third studio album by Canadian hard rock band *Triumph*, released in 1979. I'd love to know what made them pick that name.

GAMING THE SYSTEM

Gaming the system (rigging, abusing, cheating, milking, or bending the rules) can be defined as using the rules and procedures that are established to protect a system to, instead, manipulate it for a desired outcome.

It means taking advantage of the rules, while not actually breaking them, in a way that provides you an advantage that others do not take. Some people frown on such action; others regard it as a game and are determined to win everything they can.

The expression was used as early as the mid-1970s to discuss systems engineering. It did not become popular in the general culture until the 1990s.

Although the term generally carries negative connotations, gaming the system can be used for benign purposes in the undermining and dismantling of corrupt or oppressive organisations. A similar expression, "working the system," has no negative connotations, but simply implies that one is working within the system to attain desired sets of goals.

An ideal system would be immune to gaming, but these are rare. The financial crisis of 2007–08 demonstrated that US financial markets could be gamed. Online communities are gamed, no matter what rules are instituted to control behavior. Children game their parents by playing one off against

the other. Medical practitioners game the system by adapting treatment to the payment system rather than clinical need.

Gaming the system is deprecated because it violates the purpose of the rules. Adding more rules to prevent gaming generally doesn't work, since this introduces more loopholes, and usually makes the system harder to understand and less practical.

There's no such thing as "gaming the system" in evolution because evolution does not and cannot impose a morality. That which happens, happens. But humans, of necessity, have devised societal systems intended to share resources and provide services in a fair way. Fairness, though people have an intuitive sense of it, is only vaguely defined and impossible to legislate in a perfect, even-handed way.

Our systems generally work well enough for the majority. But there are always individuals who fall through the cracks. Some fall down through the cracks and get no benefit. Others crawl up through the cracks and get more benefit than they should. There is no way of eliminating the natural tendency of humans to be selfish, to get as much as they can for themselves. It's a survival instinct that thrives in spite of our many systems.

Most people contribute to our societal systems by choice. They do so because they want to do the right thing. But there are people who do regard the systems we have as simply games.

A game is something you play, that you have fun with. And there are very few of us who won't at least smile because we lied just the teensiest bit on our income tax returns and got away with it. After all, the income tax department is way bigger than we are. So, if we cheat them out of ten bucks, it's like a flea grabbing a molecule of blood from an elephant.

Fair? No, of course not. But fun? Yes. Even if we do get caught and the elephant stomps us.



ODDBALLS TWO

HONEY WAGON

"Honey wagon" is the slang term for a vehicle that transports human excrement. The first known use of the phrase was circa 1891. The name is also applied to portable toilet units necessary for the film and television industry.

These vehicles are used to empty the sewage or septic tanks of buildings, aircraft lavatories, passenger train toilets and at campgrounds and marinas as well as portable toilets. The folk etymology behind the name 'honey wagon' is thought to relate to the honey-colored liquid that comes out of it when emptying the holding tanks.

The honey wagon was originally a horse-drawn vehicle that went through back alleys to collect human excreta. In rural areas the outhouse usually was placed above a pit latrine, but many towns and cities depended on some variant of the pail closet, which needed frequent emptying. At each outdoor toilet, the driver (honey dipper) would flip up the back hatch door of the outhouse, slide out the bucket, and dump the contents into one of eight oak half-barrels in the wagon box. The half-barrels had no lids.

The historical society of one southern Alberta town reports that the town decided to hire a "night soil scavenger." In September 1909 E.P. Mee was contracted at \$25 per week to clean the toilets. The city agreed to supply the lime. The report also said, "When you ask about the worst, most dirty, horrible job, many people immediately respond with coal mining." Obviously, the writer had another job in mind.

I grew up on a homestead in northern BC and our privy was built above a deep pit. Every so often, my father would dump lime into the pit. This apparently destroyed the waste, because we never had to move the privy to a new pit. There was no collection service outside of towns, of course.

Later, I lived in a very small town without water or sewer systems. Two trucks performed those services. The water truck delivered water to the leaky barrel in my kitchen and the honey wagon took away the waste from the outhouse. Water in, garbage out.

The phrase "honey wagon" is also a slang term for a car which the owner thinks has the power to pick up honeys (girls). If you live in the North, though, the most valuable attribute of such a car is not its looks, but a functional heater.

WONDERLAND WORDS

Alice's Adventures in Wonderland is an 1865 English children's novel by Lewis Carroll, a mathematics don at Oxford University. It is one of the first works meant to delight or entertain children rather than to instruct them. The tale plays with logic, giving the story lasting popularity with adults as well as with children.

Jabberwocky, a poem about the killing of a creature called the Jabberwock, is found in *Through the Looking-Glass*, the sequel to *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*. It's considered one of the greatest nonsense poems written in English. Its playful, whimsical language has given English marvelous neologisms such as "galumphing" and "chortle."

The poem delights me, though it's been many years since I was a child. Alice liked it, too, for she says, "Somehow it seems to fill my head with ideas—only I don't exactly know what they are!" The poem uses standard English grammar and syntax, which makes it seem as though you could understand the words if you just tried a little harder.

Jabberwocky tells a tale of good versus evil in which a young man sets out to slay a fearsome monster, the Jabberwock. The poem, which is filled with made-up words, is often praised for its linguistic creativity, appealing just as much to readers' ears as it does to their imaginations.

JABBERWOCKY

'Twas brillig, and the slithy toves
Did gyre and gimble in the wabe:
All mimsy were the borogoves,
And the mome raths outgrabe.

"Beware the Jabberwock, my son!
The jaws that bite, the claws that catch!
Beware the Jubjub bird, and shun
The frumious Bandersnatch!"

He took his vorpal sword in hand:
Long time the manxome foe he sought.
So rested he by the Tumtum tree,
And stood awhile in thought.

And, as in uffish thought he stood,
The Jabberwock, with eyes of flame,
Came whiffling through the tulgey wood,

And burbled as it came!

One, two! One, two! And through and through
The vorpal blade went snicker-snack!
He left it dead, and with its head
He went galumphing back.

"And hast thou slain the Jabberwock?
Come to my arms, my beamish boy!
O frabjous day! Callooh! Callay!"
He chortled in his joy.

'Twas brillig, and the slithy toves
Did gyre and gimble in the wabe:
All mimsy were the borogoves,
And the mome raths outgrabe.

In later writings, Carroll said, "The new words, in the poem Jabberwocky, have given rise to some differences of opinion as to their pronunciation, so it may be well to give instructions on that point." He suggests pronouncing 'slithy' as if it were the two words 'sly,' and 'thee;' make the 'g' hard in 'gyre' and 'gimble;' and pronounce 'rath' to rhyme with 'bath.'

Because his words are such fun, I've listed them, along with possible interpretations.

Bandersnatch — A swift moving creature with snapping jaws, capable of extending its neck. A "bander" was an archaic word for a "leader," suggesting that a "bandersnatch" might be an animal that hunts the leader of a group.

Beamish — Radiantly beaming, happy, cheerful. Carroll didn't invent this word; the OED cites it as in use by 1530.

Borogove — Following the poem, Humpty Dumpty says that 'borogove' is a thin shabby-looking bird with its feathers sticking out all round, something like a live mop. In *Mischmasch*, Carroll describes it differently: "An extinct kind of Parrot. They had no wings, beaks turned up, and made their nests under sundials, lived on veal."

Brillig — Four o'clock in the afternoon, the time when you begin broiling things for dinner. According to *Mischmasch*, it is derived from the verb "to bryl" or broil.

Burbled — Could be a mixture of the three verbs "bleat," "murmur," and "warble." It's an old word which means "made a bubbling or gushing

sound."

Chortled — Combination of "chuckle" and "snort." (OED)

Frabjous — Possibly a blend of "fair," "fabulous," and "joyous." (OED)

Frumious — Combination of "fuming" and "furious."

Galumphing — A blend of "gallop" and "triumphant." Cited by Webster as "To move with a clumsy and heavy tread."

Gimble — Humpty Dumpty says it means "to make holes like a gimlet."

Gyre — To go round and round like a gyroscope. Gyre is entered in the OED from 1420, meaning a circular or spiral motion or form, especially a giant circular oceanic surface current. Carroll also wrote in *Mischmasch* that it meant to scratch like a dog.

Jabberwock — The result of much excited and voluble discussion. But often depicted as a monster like a dragon, with a long serpentine neck, rabbit-like teeth, spidery talons, bat-like wings and, as a humorous touch, a waistcoat.

Jubjub bird — A desperate bird that lives in perpetual passion. "Jub" is an ancient word for a jerkin or a dialect word for the trot of a horse (OED). It might make reference to a bird call resembling the sound "jub jub."

Manxome — Possibly "fearsome;" possibly a portmanteau of "manly" and "buxom;" and for cat-lovers everywhere, including me, possibly a Manx cat at home.

Mimsy — Humpty Dumpty says, "Mimsy is flimsy and miserable."

Mome — Humpty Dumpty says, "I think it's short for "from home," meaning that they'd lost their way, you know." *Mischmasch* defines it as "grave."

Outgrabe — Humpty says that "outgribe" is something between bellowing and whistling, with a kind of sneeze in the middle. Carroll suggests it is the past tense of the verb to "outgribe," connected with the old verb to "grike" or "shrike," which gave rise to "shriek" and "creak" and hence "squeak."

Rath — A sort of green pig, according to Humpty Dumpty. In *Mischmasch*, Carroll says it's a species of land turtle. Head erect, mouth like a shark, the front forelegs curved out so that the animal walks on its knees, smooth green body, lives on swallows and oysters."

Slithy — Humpty Dumpty says, "lithe and slimy," or "smooth and active."

Snicker-snack — Possibly related to the large knife, the snickersnee.

Tove — Humpty Dumpty says toves are something like badgers, something like lizards, something like corkscrews; they make their nests under sundials and live on cheese. They "gyre and gimble," or "rotate and bore."

Tulgey — Carroll himself said he could give no source for this word, that it could be taken to mean thick, dense, dark. It may have come from the Anglo-Cornish word *tulgu*, or "darkness," which in turn comes from Cornish *tewolgow* meaning "darkness, gloominess."

Uffish — Carroll said this is a state of mind when the voice is gruffish, the manner roughish, and the temper huffish. A perfect description of how I feel when a scammer phones me at 3 a.m.

Vorpal — It has appeared in dictionaries as meaning both "deadly" and "extremely sharp."

Wabe — The characters in the poem suggest it means "The grass plot around a sundial," called a "wa-be" because it "goes a long way before it, and a long way behind it."

The poem is often cited as one of the greatest nonsense poems written in English, the source for countless parodies and tributes, such as "Oh Freddled Gruntbuggly" recited by Prostetnic Vogon Jeltz in Douglas Adams' *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*, a 1979 book with numerous other references and homages to Carroll's work. And I must say that Adams' talent for dreaming up weird words and names is as good as Carroll's.

Oh freddled gruntbuggly thy micturations are to me
As plurdled gabbleblotchits on a lurgid bee.
Groop I implore thee my foonting turlingdromes
And hooptiously drangle me with crinkly bindlewurdles,
Or I will rend thee in the gobberwarts with my
blurglecruncheon, see if I don't!

In *Through the Looking-glass*, Lewis Carroll wrote, "When I use a word," Humpty Dumpty said, in rather a scornful tone, "it means just what I choose it to mean—neither more nor less."

The freedom suggested by Humpty Dumpty makes me beamish, but the results would be confusing and make me frumious and then uffish. I think I'll take a vorpal to his idea.

OF COURSE

The phrase "of course" means something that is to be expected as a natural or logical consequence, perhaps an abbreviation of "as a matter of course." It's also used to give or emphasize agreement or permission. "Can I see you for a minute?" "Of course!"

As early as the 1200s, Anglo-Normans were using *de cours* to signify when something was routine, and English speakers started doing the same with "of course" in the 1500s. It was a concise way of saying that it was exactly how you'd expect it to be.

A few synonyms:

- naturally, certainly, obviously, clearly
- as might be expected
- needless to say
- as was anticipated
- it goes without saying
- by all means
- with pleasure
- sure thing

There are different shades of meaning, however, depending on the context.

- condescension (as in "Duh!")
- realization (like "Eureka!" in a light bulb moment)
- enthusiasm ("Will you marry me?")

Besides, it rolls off the tongue a little easier than, say, "Such is the expected course of events."

PI

"Pi," a ratio that's never-ending, has fascinated mathematicians for 4,000 years. The digits of pi have been calculated out to more than 22 trillion decimal places without repeating. Pi can be found everywhere: circles, arcs, pendulums, and interplanetary navigation.

The definition of pi is simple: a circle's circumference divided by its diameter. But, whether it's a tennis ball or Mars, that ratio of circumference to diameter will always equal the same answer, more than 22 trillion decimal places long, shorted to 3.14.

National Pi Day was officially recognized by US Congress in 2009, and the date, of course, is March 14, since the first digits of pi are 3.14. You can bake a pie to celebrate or enter a pi memorization contest. The world record for memorizing and reciting the most digits of pi was set by Suresh Kumar

Sharma of India in 2015 when he recited a staggering 70,030 digits in 17 hours and 14 minutes. And only 21,999,999,929,970 to go.

I might manage 10 digits. I guess that's a start.

PLUM PLUMB PLUMP

These three words look so much alike that they can be confusing, but they're not the same at all.

PLUM is a fruit and may have been one of the first fruits domesticated by humans. When the fruit is dried it's called a prune. Plums can be eaten fresh, used in jams, or fermented into wine and distilled into brandy.

A popular dessert is plum duff, basically a plum pudding with lots of raisins or currants. "Duff" is a former north England pronunciation of dough. The earliest record of the term comes from R. H. Dana's *Two Years Before the Mast* (1840). The sociologist Henry Mayhew records it as being one of the foods for sale on the street in London in the 1850s, its itinerant vendor being known as a plum duffer.

In the late 1700s, the word plum was used to indicate "something desirable," probably in reference to tasty fruit pieces in desserts. So, it's now used this way: a plum deal, a plum job, a plum apartment. The British often refer to something good as "plummy."

If things can be peachy keen, why can't they be plum crazy? Because they're already plumb crazy.

PLUMB has several functions and meanings. The "b" is silent, which makes the word sound like the fruit, but it's really mostly to do with plumbing and measuring depth. The word comes from the Latin *plumbum*, meaning "lead."

As a noun:

—a lead weight attached to a line and used to indicate a vertical direction

As a verb:

—to weight with lead

—to measure depth with a plumb (fathom or sound)

—to examine minutely and critically (to plumb the book's complexities)

—to adjust or test by a plumb line

—to seal with lead

—to supply with or install as plumbing

As an adverb:

- straight down or up: vertically
- to a complete degree: absolutely ("You're plumb crazy," she remarked.)
- in a direct manner: exactly

As an adjective:

- exactly vertical or true
- thorough, complete (absolute, downright, flat-out, very, bodacious)

The word is often used in the phrases "out of plumb" and "off plumb" to mean "out of vertical or true," or "not precisely vertical."

A plumb bob is a weight, usually with a pointed tip on the bottom, suspended from a string and used in a vertical direction as a reference line, or plumb line. It is a precursor to the spirit level and is typically made of stone, wood, or lead, but can also be made of other metals. The instrument has been used since at least the time of ancient Egypt to ensure that constructions are "plumb," or vertical.

Because "plumb" means truly, completely, entirely straight, it's used as an intensifier as in, "Oh sorry, I quite forgot," or "I strongly disagree." This began around 1748, when someone was called "plumb silly." From that came "plumb crazy" (or its twin, "plumb loco"), "plumb tired," and other such straightforward expressions.

"Plumb crazy," of course, has some serious history. The word "plumber" dates from the Roman Empire. Romans used lead in conduits and drainpipes and for making baths. Apparently, they also used to put lead into wine to make it taste sweeter. Lead is a neurotoxin and can mess up your head.

PLUMP, like plumb, functions in several ways. It's mostly commonly known as an adjective which means "have a full rounded usually pleasing form," as in "plump cheeks." Synonyms include ample and abundant.

As a verb it means:

- dropping, sinking, or placing heavily, as in "they plumped down in the chair."
- giving enthusiastic support to someone or something, as in "plumping for the incumbent candidate." Or, "plumping for apple pie rather than lemon."
- making or becoming plump, as in "plumping the pillows."

As a noun, it means:

- a sudden fall, or the sound such a plump makes, as in "the plump of stones falling into the water."
- a group or flock, as in "a plump of ducks."

As an adverb, it means:

- with a sudden or heavy drop, as in "landing plump on the floor."
- straight down, as in "falling plump to the bottom."
- straight ahead, as in "standing plump in the path."
- directly, as in "say it plump and plain." Or "plump out of luck."

Well, nobody ever said English was easy.

Just remember that if someone gets a "plumb job" that could mean one of two things. It's a job that requires the employee to stand perfectly straight or a job where the employee measures things along perfectly straight lines—for "plumb" is something perfectly vertical or in line.

Do you think that some plump plumbers have both "plumb jobs" and "plum jobs?"

QUICKSAND

"Quicksand" means deep, wet sand that you sink into if you try to walk on it, or is used figuratively for something that entraps or frustrates. Synonyms: entanglement, snare, trap, web, morass, quagmire.

The term dates to c. 1300, from Middle English *quyk* "living" plus *sond* "sand." Similar terms are "quick buck" (1946), and "quick-change artist" (1886) meaning an actor expert in playing different roles in the same performance of a show. "Quick-witted" is from the 1520s. The old US colloquial sense for sand of "grit, endurance, pluck" appears by 1867.

Quicksand won't swallow you whole, and it's not as hard to escape from as movies like *Indiana Jones and the Kingdom of the Crystal Skull* might make you think. It was probably the number-one hazard faced by silver-screen adventurers, though, followed by decaying rope bridges and giant clams that could hold a diver underwater. In fact, it's nothing more than a soupy mixture of sand and water. It can occur anywhere under the right conditions, according to the United States Geological Survey.

Quicksand is created when water saturates an area of loose sand. There are two ways in which sand can become agitated enough to create quicksand:

- Increase in flowing underground water.
- Earthquakes: Shaking ground can increase the pressure of shallow groundwater, which liquefies sand and silt deposits. The liquefied surface loses strength, causing buildings or other objects on that surface to sink or fall over. The vibration plus the water barrier reduces the friction between the sand grains and causes the sand to behave like a fluid.

If you stand on the driest part of the beach, the sand holds you up just fine. The friction between the sand particles creates a stable surface to stand on.

Closer to the water, sand that is moderately wet is even more tightly packed than the dry sand. A moderate amount of water creates the capillary attraction that allows sand particles to clump together. This is what allows you to build sandcastles. But an excessive amount of water flowing through the densely packed wet sand forces the sand particles apart. This separation causes the ground to loosen, and any mass on the saturated loose sand will begin to sink through it.

If you step into quicksand, the key is not to panic. Most people who drown in quicksand, or any liquid for that matter, usually panic and begin to make frantic leg and arm movements. If you just relax, your body will float in it because your body is less dense than the quicksand. The average human body has a density of 62.4 pounds per cubic foot and is able to float on water. Quicksand is denser than water — it has a density of about 125 pounds per cubic foot — which means you can float more easily on quicksand than on water.

"By the same token, if the quicksand were deep, as in up to your waist, it would be very difficult to extract yourself from a dense slurry, not unlike very wet concrete," said Rick Wooten, senior geologist for Engineering Geology and Geohazards for the North Carolina Geological Survey. "The weight of the quicksand would certainly make it difficult to move if you were in above your knees."

When you try pulling one foot out of quicksand, you are working against a vacuum left behind by the movement, according to *The Worst-Case Scenario Survival Handbook*. The authors advise you to move as slowly as possible in order to reduce viscosity. Also, try spreading your arms and legs far apart and leaning over to increase your surface area, which should allow you to float.

Physicists have calculated that the force required to extract your foot from quicksand at a rate of one centimeter per second is roughly equal to the force needed to lift a medium-sized car. One genuine danger is that a person who is immobilized in quicksand could be engulfed and drowned by an incoming tide—quicksands often occur in tidal areas—but even these types of accidents are very rare.

While animals and people do sometimes die in quicksand, it's almost never from drowning — it's from exposure, dehydration, or predation after exhausting themselves struggling to get out. Predators often get caught, too. The La Brea Tar Pits in Los Angeles are a well-known example of fossil troves.

The name "Quicksand" has been used for a band, a movie, a novel, and a font. A font? A font like quicksand? The mind boggles.

RICKROLLING

"Rickrolling" is an internet meme that involves tricking someone into listening to Rick Astley sing his 1987 song, *Never Gonna Give You Up*. It was first seen on 4chan and is called a "bait and switch." A bait and switch happens when the prankster gives a website address to someone saying that it's about something they've been discussing. When the victim clicks the link, they see Astley's music video and have thus been "rickrolled."

Rickrolling is said to have begun as a spin-off of an earlier prank called duckrolling, which was when a link was supposed to lead to a picture or news story but would really link to an edited picture of a duck on wheels. The victim was then said to have been duckrolled. The first instance of rickrolling happened in May 2007 on the 4chan video game board, where a link to the video was said to be a copy of the first trailer for *Grand Theft Auto IV*. The joke was confined to 4chan for only a short time.

The song was Astley's debut single and a Number One hit for him on many international charts like the Billboard Hot 100, Hot Adult Contemporary Tracks, and UK Top 40 charts. The rick part of rickrolling, of course, comes from Astley's first name.

By 2011, rickrolling had become so mainstream that the White House's official Twitter handle sent users to the video of *Never Gonna Give You Up* after a user complained that the correspondence briefing from that day wasn't as entertaining as the one from the day before.

On July 29, 2021, the *Never Gonna Give You Up* YouTube video reached a billion views.

Astley himself has been rickrolled a few times; in fact, the first time predated the viral phenomenon. In an interview with Larry King, Astley stated that the first time he fell for the prank was through an email his friend sent him during the early 2000s. On a Reddit post in June 2020, a user claimed to have met Astley backstage when they were 12 years old and said he would post a picture verifying the encounter. Instead, the user posted a link to the song. Astley later confirmed he had been tricked into clicking the link.

I wouldn't mind being rickrolled. It sure beats discovering that someone has put sugar in my saltshaker.

YOU'RE TOAST

To be "toast" means you're in serious trouble, ruined, finished, or wrecked. If you're toast, you're about to lose your job, say, or be punished or killed.

The phrase must be distinguished from being "the toast of something," which means a person receiving much acclaim. The term can be applied to a person, a group, an idea, a project, and so on. For example, your favorite football team may be toast this year because it has so many injured players that it can't possibly win.

Originally, "toast" meant bread browned by exposure to heat. The source of the noun "toast" was the verb "to toast," which came from the Old French "toster" (to roast or grill), which in turn came from the Latin "torrere," to parch (which is related to the Latin "terra," meaning dry land as opposed to the sea).

Since the 1800s, "to have someone on toast" has meant that the victim is at one's mercy, completely vulnerable. "Thinking he had got us fairly on toast, he meant to blackmail us pretty freely." (1895)

The phrase "be toast" apparently originated in the film *Ghostbusters* in 1985. Bill Murray said, as he prepared to fire his anti-protoplasm gun, "This chick is toast." According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, Murray may have ad-libbed the line, as the original script read "Okay. That's it! I'm gonna turn this guy into toast."

"Toast" in this sense quickly became popular. Interestingly, Murray's ad-lib changed the line from a simple statement of future action ("I'm gonna...") into what linguists call a "proleptic" use that "jumps ahead" to a future state ("you are toast") as if it were already accomplished. It's a neat way to make a threat more menacing. Gangster movies often use the line, "You're a dead man," which is far scarier than a simple "I'm gonna kill you."

Scarier for some people. If I say "You're toast" to my cat, she just flicks her tail, gives me a contemptuous look, and stalks off.



HIT THE ROAD, JACK

The verb "hit" means to bring one's hand, a tool, or a weapon into contact with someone or something quickly and forcefully. The noun "hit" represents a strike. There are many, many synonyms, which is not surprising, since hitting things was probably one of the things we learned long before we discovered how to make fire. Because the word has been around for so long, there are also many phrases that use it. Let's get in the mood by looking first at a few that merit only a line or two.

hit the... — go somewhere. Hit the beach, hit the slopes, hit the bar.

hit me — what you say when you're playing blackjack and you want another card.

hit me again — what you say to the bartender when you want another drink.

hit up — ask for something, usually money, or to contact someone.

hit the books — to study hard, as for an exam, to cram. (mid-1900s)

hit below the belt — a low blow, underhanded, unfair, a groin attack.

hit the bottle — drink heavily.

hit the spot — to be exactly right, to be refreshing, to get total satisfaction.

hit the headlines — to get a lot of publicity from the media.

hit a nerve — cause an emotional reaction by referring to a sensitive topic.

hit it big — score a major success, especially a profit or a windfall.

hit list — a list of targets, usually people to be murdered. (1972)

hit man — a professional assassin, hatchet man, hired killer.

hit on — discover something, make sexual advances, to strike.

hit a sour note — refer to something unpleasant, to agitate.

hit it on the nose — to be very accurate or precisely correct.

HIT THE ROOF

This phrase, in use since the 1800s, means suddenly to become very angry. So angry and enraged, in fact, that you feel as if you might actually explode and bang your head on the roof. The original version (1600s) was "up on the roof" and meant to be so infuriated that you could lift the roof right off the house.

It is also often used to describe a rapid increase in prices or anything else where quantity is concerned. Though I have yet to hear anyone saying that their production of zucchini has hit the roof.

Common synonyms: hit the ceiling, go through the roof/ceiling. Not only have the zucchinis pushed their way through the ceiling, the prices are now sky-high.

HIT THE DECK

You could say that "hit the deck" is the opposite of "hit the roof." It means to drop down to the floor suddenly so that you are hidden from view or protected from danger. "Hit the deck" is often used as a command when someone is under gunfire.

The word deck means the "floor" of a ship. The expression "hit the deck" originated with the navy and came into use in the early 1900s. It achieved peak popularity during World War II.

But it can also mean to prepare for action, or to get out of bed. In the early 1900s the expression was nautical slang for "jump out of bed," or "wake up," and somewhat later, "get going." It may be considered the opposite of hit the hay or hit the sack, which mean to go to bed. It's also the name of a movie and a board game.

HIT THE SACK/HAY

When you hit the sack, you're saying your body will hit the bed when you lie down. During World War II, American soldiers started referring to their sleeping bags as "sacks." "Hit the sack" replaced the earlier expression "hit the hay."

Why hay? Early mattresses were just large sacks stuffed with something soft, like feathers or hay. Before people lay down to sleep, they pounded on the sack till the straw or hay was evenly spread. Hence the expression "hit the hay."

HIT THE BRICKS

To "hit the bricks" means to leave. Often, the idiom is used to mean quitting a job, implying that one must walk the streets looking for a new job. It's an echo of the days when most streets were paved with bricks. "Hit the bricks" was also a slang term used in the early 1900s by American trade unions to mean "go on strike." You can visualize workers walking up and down a brick street in front of a company building, holding picket signs.

HIT THE BULL'S-EYE

To "hit the bull's-eye" (or "the mark") means to hit the center of a target, to be exactly right about something or find the perfect solution or description. The round black center of a target has been called a bull's-eye since the 1600s, and "to hit the nail on the head" dates from the 1500s. The word "bull's-eye" may arise simply from the similarity of a target to the shape of a bull's eye. Another possibility is that English longbow yeomen practiced firing arrows at bull skulls, aiming at the eye sockets.

"Bull's-eye" can be used to describe a thick glass disk that is a small window or porthole on a ship. If you're talking to a sailor, be sure to say "porthole." There's no such thing as a window on a ship.

HIT THE GROUND RUNNING

"Hit the ground running" means to get off to a flying start. Imagine a racehorse bursting out of the gate, or a ten-year-old kid when school lets out for the day.

One common theory says the phrase arose in WWII from the US military, describing the action of troops rushing into battle. However, the literal use of this phrase is first found near the end of the 1800s in the USA in a whimsical story which was syndicated in several newspapers, including *The Evening News*, 23rd April 1895, in a piece headed *King of All the Liars*:

"I turned to run and figured to a dot when he shot. As he cracked loose I jumped way up in the air and did a split, just like what these show gals does, only mine wasn't on the ground by six foot. The bullet went under me. I knew he had five more cartridges, so I hit the ground running and squatted low down when his gun barked a second time."

There are many references to the term in the early 1900s. These relate to the various ways people might literally do this, for instance, hobos jumping from freight trains, troops being dropped by parachute, and so on.

Go ahead, do it! But don't break an ankle.

HIT THE HIGH SPOTS

I suspect most people think that "hitting the high spots" means visiting the most exciting places in town. But it can also mean to do only the most important, obvious, or good tasks. For example, when I'm cleaning the house, I only do the places that show. Nobody's ever going to notice the dust balls under the bed, are they?

But you can't hit only the high spots on your income tax return!

HIT THE JACKPOT

To "hit the jackpot" means getting great or unexpected success, especially in making a lot of money quickly. These days it often means winning the lottery but is also used to describe getting the gold medal in sports or acquiring something very beneficial or perfectly suited for you. Similar terms are "strike it rich" and "get lucky."

The term comes from a form of draw poker in which a hand can be opened only if the declarer holds a pair of jacks (or higher cards). Several rounds may have to be dealt before someone holds a hand good enough to open and the players must ante up (put in money) for each round. Therefore, the pot, or total amount being held, called the jackpot, is likely to be larger than usual. Hence winning this jackpot constitutes a sizable gain, and the term, which originated in 1800s America, soon was transferred to similar big winnings or successes.

No, you can't win the lottery if you don't buy a ticket.

HIT PAY DIRT

To "hit pay dirt" means to make a profit or a valuable discovery.

This North American term dates from the 1850s, during the California Gold Rush, and was no doubt also used in Alaska. The Klondike was, and still remains, the producer of most of the world's gold because the earth is so rich in the element. They just had to dig for a while to get to it. Through all that ice and snow, of course, as well as the dirt.

When miners found an area rich with gold ore, they would say they'd hit pay dirt. This referred to gravel or sand containing enough gold to be profitably worked.

The idiom is also used in a figurative sense to mean any profitable

enterprise. Synonyms are "strike gold," and "make a killing."

HIT THE SKIDS

To "hit the skids" is an American term meaning to begin a rapid decline or deterioration; experience a period of trouble; go downhill; hit rock bottom.

Used as a noun, a "skid" is a group of planks or logs used to support something, as in a road, or as a platform to aid in coaxing logs or blocks of stone over a distance. Used as a verb, "to skid" means your tires or feet fail to grip the roadway.

The *Oxford English Dictionary* provides two definitions for "skid road":
—a way or track formed of skids (along which logs are hauled)
—a downtown area frequented by loggers; now called "skid-row"

A widely held theory is that the original Skid Road was an area in Seattle, which, in the 1800s, was frequented by loggers, who predictably came to town to spend their money on wine, women, and song. This area was, or became, the place where down-and-outers, alcoholics, tramps, and other poor and homeless people hung out. In the early 1900s, the name metamorphosed into "Skid Row" and was applied to areas of similar degeneration in other cities.

Hitting the skids is the total opposite of hitting the jackpot.

HIT THE WALL

To "hit the wall" or "hit the bonk" means to reach a point when you are so physically or mentally depleted that you have no energy to continue. The terms gained popularity in the 1960-1970s when jogging became a fad, and the phenomenon became more commonly known.

The term "bonk" for fatigue is presumably derived from the original meaning "to hit," and dates back at least half a century. Its earliest citation in the *Oxford English Dictionary* is a 1952 article in the *Daily Mail*.

To "hit a brick wall" means to meet an obstacle that ends your endeavor. A brick wall, in this instance, is something impossible to overcome. The term "brick wall" came into use in the 1880s to mean an insurmountable obstacle.

When an athlete in one of the endurance sports such as road cycling or long-distance running hits the wall, he feels exhausted, may be in pain, and could feel psychologically defeated. This is due to a depletion of glycogen

stores in the muscles and the liver. Many marathon runners hit the wall at around 20 miles.

Milder instances can be remedied by brief rest and the ingestion of carbohydrates. Or else, the athlete can attain a second wind by either resting for about 10 minutes or by slowing down, then increasing speed slowly over a period of 10 minutes. The condition can usually be avoided by keeping glycogen levels high or by reducing exercise intensity. Going too fast or trying to push through the pain encourages protein metabolism over fat metabolism, and the muscle pain in this circumstance is a result of muscle damage.

Hitting the wall has also been applied to mental and emotional fatigue in everyday life. We can hit the wall when under a lot of stress or pressure, which can be a combination of internal and external factors. Both hitting the wall and pushing past it may reverberate through a person's life. It can help to understand and identify the warning signs.

Different kinds of people can hit the wall for different reasons and at different times. For example, some very regimented people can be overwhelmed by a wide variety of "to-dos." For other people, it's the avoidance of tasks or the inability to follow through which may lead to an overwhelming list of undone tasks.

When people hit a mental wall, it is usually when anxiety and stress have brought them into a fight/flight/freeze state where they can't think through the problems.

Good athletes know their limits and so should we all. We can train ourselves to know when we are approaching the wall and how to push the wall further back.

I guess you could say that if you hit the wall, the wall is inclined to hit back.

HIT YOUR STRIDE

To "hit your stride" means to achieve a steady, effective pace. It can also mean to become confident and proficient in a particular area. This expression comes from horse racing, "stride" alluding to the regular pace of the horse. (Early 1900s)

HIT THE PANIC BUTTON

When you "hit the panic button," you're reacting to a situation with fear and confusion. On the other hand, if there is a panic button installed on

whatever device you're using, you may simply be doing something quickly to deal with a worrying situation.

The phrase "pressing the panic button" is part of pop culture, and "Time to Start Work on a Panic Button?" was a *New York Times* 2011 headline on an article about planning for global warming.

A panic alarm or button is an electronic device that can be activated quickly to get help during an emergency. It is designed to contact assistance faster and easier than a conventional phone call. Sometimes the button is concealed, such as in a bank. Many panic alarm buttons lock when pressed and require a key to reset them. Others may have a short delay, during which time the request of help can be cancelled. That doesn't help if you're so scared and muddled that you can't remember what to do.

Alarm panic buttons include those in critical systems such as nuclear weapons systems, car key fobs, medical alerts, home burglar alarms, taxi and personal safety alarms, and places like service stations or corner groceries staffed with a single employee.

One 2014 newspaper article described a computer browser feature actually called PanicButton, meant to be pressed to hide whatever you're viewing when the boss walks by.

Then there's my phone timer alarm which, if I remember to set it, prevents me from letting the pot of potatoes on the stove boil dry and burn. Over the years I've perfected this technique of browning potatoes.

HIT OR MISS

Something done in a careless, haphazard way is done in a hit-or-miss fashion. If the action is successful, it's a "hit." If not, it's a "miss." This term has been used since the 1500s and almost certainly comes from shooting or throwing at some kind of target. Shakespeare used it in *Troilus and Cressida*.

HIT IT OFF

"Hit it off" means that two (or more) people become friendly immediately because they are well suited and get along easily. People who hit it off usually have interests, hobbies, goals, or attitudes in common and can be said to have "clicked." This idiom dates back to the 1780s.

HITTING ON ALL CYLINDERS

"Hitting (firing) on all cylinders" means operating or performing exceptionally well or at the greatest possible speed or efficiency. It can also mean doing a task with great enthusiasm and energy. "Firing on all cylinders," said of a motor, means to run smoothly or at full power without any missing or skipping. The expression was first used in the US in the early 1900s and refers to a function of the internal combustion engine.

HIT PARADE

A "hit parade" is a ranked list of the most popular recordings at a given point in time, usually determined either by sales or airplay. The term originated in the 1930s when *Billboard* magazine published its first music hit parade. It has also been used by broadcast programs such as *Your Hit Parade*, which aired on radio and television in the US from 1935 through the 1950s. The meaning has now expanded to include a group or listing of the most popular or noteworthy items of a particular kind.

HIT ROCK BOTTOM

When you "hit rock bottom," you cannot go any lower. The only way left is up.

This expression comes from mining and refers to the layer of rock that is reached once the supply of minerals being taken from the mine has been used up. It was later popularized by Alcoholics Anonymous and became part of our everyday language. Usually, it means that a person has reached a point where there is nothing left to lose.

The phrase is often used in the world of commerce. For example, "This is a good time to buy a house. Prices have reached rock-bottom in most areas." Or the depths can be emotional, as in, "Morale within the company was at rock bottom."

My problem is that whenever prices are at rock-bottom, so is my bank account.

HIT AND RUN

The term "hit and run" is used in three different situations.

—In traffic laws, a hit and run is the crime of causing an accident, as with a motor vehicle, and fleeing the scene, attempting to evade being identified. Hit-and-run laws were among the earliest traffic laws to be enacted after the invention of motor vehicles.

—In baseball, a play where the base runners leave their base before the batter hits the ball, assuming that the batter will in fact hit the ball and this will give them an advantage.

—In the military, the technique of attacking one place and then quickly moving to another before defenders can react, known as a hit-and-run raid.

And there's a fourth situation: little kids fighting.

HIT THE ROAD

"Hit the road" means to leave, start walking, begin a journey. Literally, it may mean picking up a hammer and pounding the pavement.

HIT THE ROAD, JACK

And, finally, the best of all: a song performed by the great Ray Charles.

Here are some of the words:

(Hit the road Jack and don't you come back no more, no more, no more, no more.)

(Hit the road Jack and don't you come back no more.)

What you say?

(Hit the road Jack and don't you come back no more, no more, no more, no more.)

(Hit the road Jack and don't you come back no more.)

Woah Woman, oh woman, don't treat me so mean,

You're the meanest old woman that I've ever seen.

I guess if you said so

I'd have to pack my things and go. (That's right)

Well

(don't you come back no more.)

Uh, what you say?

(don't you come back no more.)

I didn't understand you

(don't you come back no more.)

You can't mean that

(don't you come back no more.)

Oh, now baby, please

(don't you come back no more.)

What you tryin' to do to me?

(don't you come back no more.)

Oh, don't treat me like that
(don't you come back no more.)

(Hit the road Jack and don't you come back no more, no more, no more, no more.)

(Hit the road Jack and don't you come back no more.)

What you say?

(Hit the road Jack and don't you come back no more, no more, no more, no more.)

(Hit the road Jack and don't you come back no more.)



BITS & PIECES

The phrase "bits and pieces" means small fragments, things, or objects of different kinds, a miscellaneous assortment, a collection, a hodgepodge or olio. The British phrase for it is "bits and bobs." The term is also the name for a TV series, a song, and a book of short stories, and a good description for a garage sale. Many commercial sales outlets are also named that.

What follows are words and phrases that have very short descriptions and are so miscellaneous that they don't fit anywhere else.

A BARREL OF LAUGHS

"A barrel of laughs" means something that is fun, funny, and pleasant. However, it's often used in negative statements or in an ironic way to describe someone or something that is not at all funny. The phrase began life as "a barrel of fun," meaning lots of fun. It is first cited in the USA in 1890. "I had a barrel of fun when I went to Maccasin." By the early 1900s the expression had morphed into "a barrel of real laughs." The final transformation, into "a barrel of laughs," came a few years after, around 1932. One example appeared in an advertisement for a stage show at the Apollo and Shaftesbury Theater, in London's theater district.

A DROP IN THE BUCKET

"A drop in the bucket" means an amount so small that it doesn't make any difference. A similar phrase, "a drop in the ocean," appeared a few years later and is first found in a piece from *The Edinburgh Weekly Journal*, July 1802. Since the ocean is so much larger than a bucket, it follows that a drop there is so small not even scientists could find it.

A HORSESHOE UP ONE'S ASS

To have something up one's ass, in vulgar slang, is to have it on hand and available despite the improbability of being so equipped. A horseshoe is a traditional good luck charm in folklore. Thus, to have a horseshoe up one's ass is to have extremely good luck and to carry it around continuously. The phrase is often used in a way that suggests the speaker resents the favorable luck.

APANTHROPY

"Apanthropy" describes a desire to be away from people, indicating a love of

solitude. The earliest documented use was 1753. It differs from misanthropy, which is a dislike or distrust of humankind. The word introvert is different again, meaning that the introvert tolerates and may even enjoy some social interaction, but needs frequent breaks from it. Apanthropy would have been very dangerous when early human beings lived on the savanna of Africa, but it is much safer in our modern civilization. Of course, modern civilization is perhaps the cause of apanthropy. There are so many of us now.

A WORD TO THE WISE

A "word to the wise" is a hint, warning, or brief explanation meant for someone who already knows what is happening or what might happen. It may have originated from the Latin phrase *Verbum sapienti sat est*, which translates to "A word to the wise is enough."

It is sometimes used for comedic effect by sharing common sense information. "A word to the wise! It's raining. Take your umbrella." Duh.

BLOW A GASKET

"Blow a gasket" means to lose one's temper and arose in the 1800s, derived from the world of machinery. When a gasket (a seal in an engine) fails, it can 'blow,' which usually results in a dramatic release of steam or energy—a pretty fitting metaphor for someone losing their cool! Synonyms are: blow a fuse, blow up, blow one's stack, go ballistic, go nuclear.

COME ACROSS

"Come across" has more than one meaning.

1. to find someone or something by chance. "I came across these old photos recently."
2. to give a particular impression. "He comes across as a decent guy."
3. to follow a certain route. "I will come across the street."
4. to furnish something demanded, especially money. "She finally came across with a twenty for my birthday."

COME UNGLUED

"Come unglued" means to become extremely angry or emotional. It can also mean to disintegrate or collapse; fall apart; break down. Synonyms are: fly off the handle, throw a fit.

DESPERATE TIMES CALL FOR DESPERATE MEASURES

Extreme and undesirable circumstances or situations can only be resolved by resorting to equally extreme actions. This phrase likely originated from the ancient Greek physician Hippocrates, who said in his *Aphorisms*: "For extreme diseases, extreme methods of cure, as to restriction, are most suitable." Another similar Latin saying appears in print as early as 1596. Thus, in adverse circumstances, actions that might have been rejected under other circumstances may become the best choice.

DOING A LAND-OFFICE BUSINESS

To do a "land-office business" means to be very successful, to do a roaring trade. For example, "After the storm they did a land-office business in snow shovels and rock salt." This term, dating from the 1830s, alludes to the throng of applicants to government land offices through which Western public lands were sold at a frantic pace. Adding to the queues were prospectors filing mining claims, which were also handled by land offices.

FEAST OR FAMINE

"Feast or famine" describes extremes, either too much or too little, too many or too few. At a feast, there is lots of food. In a famine, there is very little or no food. The phrase stands for success and failure, prosperity and depression, wealth and poverty. It is often said of artists and actors that they lead a feast-or-famine life. The modern idiom appeared in print in 1732 as "feast or fast." The word famine was not substituted until the 1900s.

GOLDEN PARACHUTE

A "golden parachute" is a generous severance agreement for a corporate executive in the event of a sudden dismissal (as because of a merger). The image of the parachute, evoking a comfortable and painless landing, may have been inspired by the popular book about career change by Richard Bolles, titled *What Color Is Your Parachute?* The first use of the term is credited to a 1961 attempt by creditors to oust Howard Hughes from control of Trans World Airlines.

IOTA

"Iota" is the ninth letter of the Greek alphabet and is used to mean an extremely small amount. For example, "Nothing she said made one iota of difference." The words iota and jot both ultimately derived from the same word. When Latin scholars transcribed the Greek name of the ninth letter of the Greek alphabet, they spelled it as either "iota" or "jota" (the letters i and j were simply variants of each other), and these spellings eventually passed into English as iota and jot. Since the Greek letter iota is the smallest letter

of its alphabet, both words eventually came to be used in reference to very small things.

LIKE A BUMP ON A LOG

This colloquial phrase "like a bump on a log" means unmoving, inactive, or lazy and is usually applied to a person. For example, "Harry just sat there like a bump on a log while everyone else joined in the fun." The first known use was in the mid-1800s and appears in such popular books as "The Adventures of Tom Sawyer." Comparing someone to a bump on a log is an insult, as it implies that the person is dull or lazy.

NEEDLE IN A HAYSTACK

A needle in a haystack is impossible or extremely difficult to find. A needle is very small; a haystack, in comparison, is very large. The first example of this phrase in print was in 1532, in the works of Sir Thomas More: "To seek out one line in all St. Austin's works were to go look a needle in a meadow." Almost eighty years later, a variation of the phrase appears in Miguel de Cervantes's magnum opus, *Don Quixote de la Mancha*. The English translation reads: "As well look for a needle in a bottle of hay." In this context "bottle" is the old English word for "bundle," so a better translation would be: "As well look for a needle in a bundle of hay."

NEITHER HERE NOR THERE

Unimportant, irrelevant, as in "You pay for the movie and I'll get the dinner check, or vice versa—it's neither here nor there." This 16th century phrase is sometimes wrongly attributed to William Shakespeare. The known use of it in print is in Arthur Golding's translation of *The sermons of J. Calvin upon Deuteronomie*, 1583: Shakespeare, however, did use the phrase later, in *Othello*, 1616.

NOTHING TO WRITE HOME ABOUT

Unexceptional, mediocre, not exciting or special, ordinary. This idiom has been in use since the late 1800's but became popular during World War I. It may have originated with troops who were stationed overseas, referring to unremarkable incidents that were not worth including in their letters to home.

ONE AND THE SAME

When two or more people or things are thought to be separate and you say that they are one and the same, you mean that they are in fact one single

person or thing.

PAR FOR THE COURSE

"Par for the course" describes what is normal or expected in any given circumstances, especially when something is a source of annoyance or frustration. For example, "I missed three questions on the exam, but that's par for the course." The term comes from golf, where it refers to the number of strokes needed by an expert golfer (of whom there are few) to finish the entire course. Its figurative use for other kinds of expectation dates from the second half of the 1900s.

PASS MUSTER

If you "pass muster" you've been accepted as adequate or satisfactory. In the 1400s, muster was used specifically to refer to the act of calling together soldiers, sailors, or prisoners for inspection, exercises, or counting. That meaning is still in common use. To pass muster is simply to meet the standards of the inspection. In more recent times, the expression has been used figuratively. "My attempt at mac 'n cheese didn't pass muster with my kids."

SADDER BUT WISER

If someone is sadder but wiser, they have suffered a bad experience but have also learned something from it.

The first recorded usage is in Samuel Taylor Coleridge's 1798 poem *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*. Here is a sample from the poem:

He went, like one that hath been stunn'd
And is of sense forlorn:
A sadder and a wiser man
He rose the morrow morn.

SMART AS A WHIP

Very quick-witted and intelligent, bright, clever, alert. (1821) The source is not known, but a good guess says it alludes to the sharp crack of a whip, which 'smarts.' In the days of horse-drawn vehicles, a horse could be urged on merely by flicking or cracking a whip near the animal. If that didn't work, you could get results by having the flick or crack touch him lightly. An expression used early in the 1800s was 'smart as a steel trap,' which does indeed operate smartly too.

SNAPDRAGON

A colorful flower named for the fancied resemblance of the flowers to the face of a dragon (1570s). Also called "dragon flowers" and "dog flowers," these plants grow blossoms that look like dragon faces, opening and closing when laterally squeezed. They come in an array of colors, including bright pink, purple, red, orange, yellow, peach, purple, and white.

THE LAST HURRAH

"The last hurrah" is an idiom representing a final act, performance, or effort before some eventuality, such as death, retirement, or some other major change. The phrase originated in a 1956 novel titled *The Last Hurrah* by Edwin O'Connor, about a politician's last mayoral campaign. The idiom is often used to refer to a final political campaign. It can also be used to refer to any other final act before a major change; a bachelor party, for instance, may be referred to as a "last hurrah" before marriage.

TOURIST TRAP

The idiom "tourist trap" came into use in the 1940s, presumably when the average family began to take vacations on the open road. A tourist trap is generally a crowded place that provides entertainment and things to buy, such as souvenirs for tourists, often at high prices.

UP THE YING-YANG

"Up (out) the ying-yang" is American slang, first seen in print in 1968, and means in very large amounts. There are several variations. "When you have money up the ying-yang, you can hire assistants." The term "yin-yang" refers to a concept originating in ancient Chinese philosophy where opposite forces are seen as interconnected and counterbalancing. It's usually represented by the yin-yang symbol, a circle made up of black and white swirls, each containing a spot of the other color.

WEAK AS WATER

Lacking physical strength or vigor, lacking force. Applied to a person, it could mean the person is easily influenced. Water always chooses the path of least resistance, and likewise, if someone is weak as water, they will do the same. The term may have originated from illegal alcohol distillation culture where low alcohol batches were said to be "weaker than well water."



TIME

"Time" is the word we use to describe the continuing sequence of events in an irreversible succession from the past, through the present, into the future. The "first known use" of the word is before the 1100s. But, because time is the very foundation of our conscious experience, I'd say that the word "time," in one form or another, has been around at least since we lived in caves.

Philosophers and scientists have proposed many theories about time but can't define it because they still don't know its fundamental nature. Some even question whether or not it is real. It's one of the biggest riddles of the universe or you could say it's the ultimate magic act. Dictionaries offer explanations of what "time" means, but every-day idioms do a far better job.

We cannot see, hear, smell, taste, or touch time, though it seems to shape our every thought and certainly permeates our language. Jorge Luis Borges said about it in *Labyrinths*, "Time is the substance from which I am made. Time is a river which carries me along, but I am the river; it is a tiger that devours me, but I am the tiger; it is a fire that consumes me, but I am the fire."

Our ancestors began measuring time out of necessity. Agriculture demanded attention to the seasons, and reaping the largest harvests demanded a knowledge of the sun and stars and their endlessly repeating motions. Many ancient cultures regard time as cyclical, as are the seasons, and picture it as a wheel.

In Greek mythology, Chronos is identified as the personification of time. Some English words whose etymological root is chronos include chronology, chronometer, chronic, anachronism, synchronize, and chronicle. We can admire the ancient Greeks for their scholarship, but also blame them for words that are hard to spell.

In the 1600s, physicist Isaac Newton saw time as an arrow fired from a bow, traveling in a direct, straight line, and never deviating from its path. This is now referred to as the "arrow of time," which is absolutely built into how we think about the past, present, and future. We make choices which affect the future but never choices which affect the past. We can't change the past, though often enough, we altar our memories.

However, in 1905, Albert Einstein postulated that time was less like an arrow and more like a river, ebbing and flowing depending on the effects of gravity and space-time. (There's that river image I like so much!)

Scientists once thought that space and time were separate, and that the universe was merely an assortment of cosmic bodies arranged in three dimensions. Einstein, however, introduced the concept of time as the fourth dimension, which meant that space and time were inextricably linked and called the result "spacetime."

That may or may not be accurate. I'll wait for the scientists to figure it out. In the meantime, one of the most important things in daily life is how time is measured.

Time is of overwhelming social importance. Benjamin Franklin said, "Remember that time is money." Time has personal value, too, because we are aware of the limited time in each day and in human life spans. In 5th century BCE Greece, Antiphon the Sophist held that, "Time is not a reality, but a concept or a measure."

Time is the basis of how we record life on Earth. Civilizations rise and fall, stars are born and extinguished, and our method of tracking how those moments relate to the present remains unchanged.

Time is not only at the heart of the way we organize life, but the way we experience it. Routines give us a sense of security. Children quickly learn the meaning of words like yesterday, today, and tomorrow. And we think of time as a commodity: we try to *save time*; we hate to *waste time*; we say we'll *make time* for some activity. When we need to catch our breath, we call a *time-out*. We say that *time flies* when we're having fun and slows to a crawl at the dentist's office. Time is free, but priceless. You can't own it, but you can use it. You can't keep it, but you can spend it. Once you've lost it you can never get it back.

Governments around the world provide time measurement. It's about keeping society organized and efficient. It's about increasing economic productivity. Humans being what they are, the calendar is also an ideological, political, and religious weapon.

There are many systems for determining what time it is here on Earth. Periodic events and periodic motion have long served as standards for units of time. Examples include the apparent motion of the sun across the sky, the phases of the moon, and the passage of a free-swinging pendulum as well as more modern systems.

The old definition of a second was based on the rotation of Earth. As it takes the sun one day to rise in the east, set in the west and rise again, the day was almost arbitrarily divided into 24 hours, an hour into 60 minutes, and a minute into 60 seconds.

Atomic clocks provide the most accurate track of time on Earth. The entire GPS system in orbit around Earth uses atomic clocks to accurately track positions and relay data to the planet, while scientific centers are set up to calculate the most accurate measure of time — usually by measuring transitions within a cesium atom.

One interesting thing about measuring time is the International Date Line. This is an imaginary line in the mid-Pacific Ocean near 180° longitude. When one travels across it westward, a calendar day is added; in passing eastward, one day is dropped, confusing brains, time pieces, and stomachs.

Another intriguing piece of science concerns "living in the present moment." But there is always a delay of several milliseconds between the moment an event occurs and the human perception of the same event. It takes time for light to travel from the event to the observer and to activate the electro/chemical reaction in our sensors. The subsequent transmission of our neural impulses to our brain, the center of our awareness, requires additional time. Therefore, it is impossible to live in the present moment. We always live in a moment which has just passed.

I read a book called *The Order of Time*, by Carlo Rovelli, a theoretical physicist and excellent writer. This is one of his descriptions of time. "Past and future are different from each other. Cause precedes effect. Pain comes after a wound, not before it. The glass shatters into a thousand pieces, and the pieces do not reform into a glass. We cannot change the past; we can have regrets, remorse, memories. The future instead is uncertainty, desire, anxiety, open space, destiny, perhaps. We can live toward it, shape it, because it does not yet exist. Everything is still possible."

He also wrote, "The world is made up of *processes*. Of something that *occurs*. Something that does not last, and that undergoes continual transformation, that is not permanent in time." What he's saying is that even objects that seem permanent are nothing more than long events. Chemistry, physics, mineralogy, and geology tell us that a rock is simply a momentary interaction of forces, a process that for a brief moment manages to keep its shape, to hold itself in equilibrium before disintegrating again into dust.

Rovelli explains "process" further. "What works is thinking about the world as a network of events. A storm is not a thing, it's a collection of occurrences. A cloud above a mountain is not a thing, it is the condensation of humidity in the air that the wind blows over the mountain. A family is not a thing, it is a collection of relations, occurrences, feelings. And a human being? Of course, it's not a thing; it's a complex process, where food, information, light, words, and so on enter and exit. A knot of knots in a

network of emotions exchanged with its own kind. But only before returning to dust. Because sooner or later, obviously, everything returns to dust."

We can't slow time down, but slow-motion photography smooths out the jumpiness of real time process. A slow-motion film of a drop of water falling into a pond becomes a symphony of liquid geometry. The wobbling, elliptical drop disappears into the water amid a perfectly circular wave that rises like a glass crown. But then, astonishingly, as the crown subsides, the drop rises again from the center on a stalk of liquid. As it falls back and is replaced by still another rebounding drop, the crown flattens into a ripple.

The process that is the human body has intricate inner clocks, evolved over thousands of years into night-sleeping and day-waking. Disturb these and you predispose the body to ill health and unhappiness, for it is extremely sensitive to time. Certain illnesses hit at certain hours of the day; heart attacks and strokes at around nine a.m., and asthma at around midnight, while other illnesses are seasonal, from SAD to spring fever.

Memory is all about time. "Now" may last just a moment, but in our minds, it can endure for decades. We remember the past and envision the future. Augustine called time a "distention" of the mind (*Confessions*) by which we simultaneously grasp the past in memory, the present by attention, and the future by expectation.

Time travel has been a plot device in fiction since the 1800s. It's the concept of moving backward or forward to different points in time. However, one fundamental, indisputable property of time is that it always and only flows in one direction. Therefore, time travel is not now possible, and it is extremely unlikely that it will ever be. Aside from the laws of relativity and quantum mechanics, time travel would require the reversal of the process of entropy. Since entropy deals with the most basic laws governing the existence of the universe, a reversal of the flow of time would entail the destruction and reconstruction of the universe.

But we all have our own personal time machines. Memories take us back in time; dreams take us forward. We'll have to make do with those to travel in time.

After all, as Stephen Hawking said, "If time travel is possible, where are the tourists from the future?"

Fourteen billion years is our best guess at the age of the universe, our best guess of just how much time has passed so far. But that brings up two questions. Was there time before our universe? Will there be time after it has returned to dust?

Let's ask a simpler question. Would you like coffee now or later?



A TIMELY LEXICON

In the last chapter, I said that dictionaries offer definitions of "time," but that every-day idioms do a far better job for most of us. Accordingly, I've listed all the "time" idioms and expressions I could find.

a devil of a time — very difficult period
a legend in one's own time — famous while still alive
a long time ago — far in the past
a long time coming — slow to happen
a matter of time — how long it takes for something to happen
a race against time — must be done quickly, because time is limited
a stitch in time (saves nine) — better to fix a problem when it's small
a stretch of time — a period, a span
a whale of a time — a good time
access time — the lag between requesting information and getting it
ahead of one's time — too advanced to be understood or appreciated
ahead of time — early
Alaska time — the current, local time in that state
all in good time — when the moment is right
all the time — constantly, on every occasion
all the time in the world — an endless supply
all-time — exceeding all others (all-time bestseller)
as good a time as any — the right moment
at a time — when
at no time — never
at one time — in the past
at the present time — now
at the same time — nevertheless
at the time of — when
at times — occasionally

bad time — inopportune; unhappy period
before one's time — before one was born or involved
behind the times — out of date
better luck next time — a wish for more success in the future
big-time — in a major way; top rank of an activity
borrowed time — postponement of something inevitable
break time — scheduled point to stop work for a break
buy time — stall
by the time — when

call a time-out — take a short period to rest or confer
chunk of time — a fairly large amount

closing time — when businesses close for the day
crunch time — a critical moment
curtain time — when a performance begins

daylight saving time — usually one hour ahead of standard time
departure/arrival time — when you are to go or arrive
die before one's time — die too young
do one's time — serve the number of months/years required
do time — serve a prison sentence
double time — quick marching cadence; twice the wage rate
double-time — move at double time; cheat on one's partner
drive time — when rush hour radio audiences are swelled by commuters
every time — always

face time — amount of time one appears on TV or at a meeting
find time — allot time in one's schedule for something
first-time — something new
for any length of time — for more than a small duration
for some time — for an indeterminate time
for the time being — for the present
free/spare time — when one is not committed to something else
from time to time — occasionally
full time — employed full time; devote one's full attention to something

gain time — do something faster than planned
garbage time — sports: last moments of a game when one side can no longer lose
give (someone) a hard time — criticize or annoy
give (someone) the time of day — pay attention, often used in negative statements
give of one's time — help
go through a rough time — experience difficulties
good time — an enjoyable experience
Greenwich mean time — the local mean time at the Royal Observatory in Greenwich, London, counted from midnight.

half-time — working half the standard hours
halftime — intermission between halves of a game
hang time — amount of time a kicked football remains in the air
hard time — a long or difficult prison sentence
hard times — a period of great difficulty
have the time? — what time is it?
have a hard/rough time — experience difficulties
have a thin time — experience difficulties because you have no money
have the time — have enough time for something
have the time of one's life — enjoy oneself very much

hitting the big time — succeeding, getting to the top

in due time — at an appropriate time

in good time — when the right moment arrives; on time; ahead of time

in its own time — in an appropriate time

in jig time — quickly

in less than no time — very, very quickly

in no time — quickly

in one's (own) sweet/good time — not when asked, but when one feels like it

in one's own time — when one wishes

in record time — in the least amount of time ever

in the course of time — as time passes

in the fullness of time — at the appropriate time

in the nick of time — just before nothing can be changed

in time — sufficiently early; in correct tempo

issues of the time — greatest challenges

it's about/high time — say something should have happened sooner

keep time — a clock shows the correct time; in music, stick to the tempo

kill time — wait; fritter away time

last time — the most recent time; the final time

lead time — that between a process starting and the appearance of results

live on borrowed time — live longer than expected

long time no see — greet someone you haven't seen for a long time

lose no time — not delay

lose time — of timepieces, to run slow; action takes longer than expected

lose track of the time — not be aware of time passing

lost in the mists of time — long forgotten

lost time — productive time lost due to injury, broken machines, etc.

make time — travel fast; gain time; make headway; court someone

make up for lost time — work harder or faster to catch up to a schedule

many a time — frequently; habitually

mark time — march in place, maintain a state of readiness

meantime — the time before something happens or ends

military time — hours are numbered one to twenty-four

move with the times — change and become more modern

no time like the present — better to do something now rather than later

no time to lose — no time to waste; little time

not before time — better late than never

old before one's time — to age faster than expected

old-time — old-fashioned

on time — on schedule; on the installment plan; punctual; on credit

once upon a time — first line of some fairy stories

one at a time — in single file; individually as opposed to collectively
one more time — once more
our time — the current period
out of time — no time left; music: not playing at tempo

pass the time — let a span of time go by
pass the time of day — to exchange greetings; chat
payback time — a time to punish or reward
play for time — try to delay something
post time — designated starting time of a horse race
present time — now
pressed for time — short of time
prime time — the choicest or busiest time
prison time — time spent in a prison
put in time — spend time on something

quality time — giving undivided attention to a relationship
question time — a period in parliament for members to question ministers
quick time — marching fast

real time — experience the actual event
regulation time — the standard period established by the game rules
run out of time — not have enough time
running time — duration of a motion picture, performance, or recording

save time — cause something to happen faster
screen time — how long someone appears in a movie; time spent watching TV, etc.
see you next time — to end a conversation, indicate a desire for further contact
serve time — spend time in prison
short of time — deficient, not having enough
short-timer — one that serves for a short time (from the 1860s)
sick time — number of days per year workers can take paid time off
since that time — from then to the present
since time immemorial — since very far in the past
small-time — insignificant, petty
some time ago — at some point in the past
space-time — a system of one temporal and 3 spatial coordinates
spare time — free time
spend time — dedicate time to an activity; hang out
stand the test of time — endure for a long period
standard time — the time of a region established by law for general use
starting time — the scheduled time for a game, race, or project to begin

take (a lot of) time — require a significant amount of time

take no time at all — an impossibility, but means very fast in general usage
take one day at a time — deal with problems as they come each day,
take one's time — be leisurely and unhurried
take time by the forelock — seize the day; take the bull by the horns
take time out — stop an activity in order to do something else
tee time — when a golf game begins
tell time — to read a time piece or the stars
term time — when schools and universities hold classes
the ravages of time — damage caused over a period of time
the sands of time — passage of time
the time has come — the right moment
the time is up — there's no time left
the whole time — always
there's no time like the present — best time to do something is now
third time lucky — twice unsuccessful, hoping the third effort works
time after time — repeatedly
time and time again — repeatedly
time bomb — a potentially dangerous delayed action
time brings all things to pass — a quote by one of those ancient Greeks
time capsule — a container holding historical records or objects
timecard — used with a time clock to record employees' starting & quitting times
time chart — shows standard times in various parts of the world
time clock — a device that stamps start and quit times on a time card
time dilation — a slowing of time in accordance with the theory of relativity
time exposure — exposing photographic film for a definite period
time flies — time passes quickly
time for bed — sleeping hours
time frame — a period dealing with some action or project
time heals all wounds — pain gradually goes away as time passes
time in the sun — a period of being popular or getting lots of attention
time is at a premium — something needs to happen or be done very soon
time is money — a person's time is as valuable as money
time is on one's side — when you can wait until a situation improves
time is running out — there's limited time to left to do something; urgency
time killer — a diversion that passes the time
time lag — interval of time between two related phenomena (cause & effect)
time limit — an amount of time in which something must be done
timeline — table listing important events in a particular period
time lock — a lock controlled by clockwork to open at a set time
time machine — a hypothetical device permitting travel to the past and future
time marches on — time continues to pass
time of one's life — a good time
time of year — summer, winter, holidays, etc.
time on one's hands — when one is not busy

time out of mind — time so long past as to be indefinite in history
time piece — any device which measures time
time poor — short of time
time series — a set of data collected sequentially, usually at fixed intervals
time sheet — a record of time worked
time signature — in music, how many beats in each measure
time slips away — time passes quickly
time span — a period of time
time stamp — a stamping device used to record date and time on a document
time suck — an activity which wastes time
time switch — a device that can be set to activate something at a certain time
time to spare — free time
time trial — competitive event where individuals are timed over a set course
time waits for no one — inevitability of birth, death, sun rising, time passing
time warp — an anomaly or discontinuity held to occur in the progress of time
time was (when) — used to say something was true in the past
time will tell — truth will only be established some time in the future
time-consuming — taking a lot, or too much time
time-honored — honored because of age or long usage
time-lapse — exposing film in a series of single shots over time, then combining
time-release — a drug released in small amounts as time passes
time-saving — intended to expedite something
time-server — one who works very little because he/she is waiting to retire or leave
time-serving — putting in time but little effort, while waiting to leave
time-share — joint ownership or rental of a vacation lodging by several people
time-tested — have effectiveness that's been proved over a long period of time
time's up — the allowed period of time has ended
timeless — not affected by time passing or changes in fashion; eternal; ageless
timeworn — damaged, impaired, or made less attractive by aging
to/till/until the end of time — always
two-time — to betray a spouse or lover; double-cross
unearthly hour/time — time of day unreasonably early or late
until such time as — a future time when something may change
waste of time — useless or poor use of time
whose time has come — which is right for the present time
with time — eventually

I can think of nothing more apt than a quote from Colette, the French

author who wrote *Gigi*. "Time spent with cats is never wasted."



MISCELLANY TWO

PREACHING TO THE CHOIR

If you say that someone is preaching to the choir, you mean that they are pointlessly trying to convince a person or group to accept an opinion that they already agree with.

This imagery stems from the traditional church where a choir sings hymns expressing the belief of the church while the preacher delivers a sermon, hoping to reach the non-believers in the congregation. It would be pointless for the preacher to turn around and deliver the sermon to the choir.

The phrase originated in the USA in the 1970s. It's based on the earlier "preaching to the converted," which dates from 1800s England and has the same meaning.

Sometimes people "preach to the choir" to vent their feelings on a matter to someone they know will understand and agree with them, rather than someone who would argue. That's why I talk to my cat so much.

OVER THE HUMP / HUMP DAY

As a noun, "hump" means a rounded protuberance, (for example, as in a camel), a low, rounded rise of ground, or a mountain range. As a verb, hump means to raise the back or to exert oneself.

"Over the hump," however, means being past the most difficult part of something, such as a project or a job, or a period of time. It's an idiom which arose in World War II. It describes a situation where the worst, or hardest part of something is over and we can relax and coast into success.

The phrase was used by American servicemen to describe flying over the Himalayas. In the early 1940s, the US flew supplies to China, to Chiang Kai-shek, who was fighting the Japanese. 'The Hump' was a slang term for the route over the Himalayas. This flight path was perilous, as it was buffeted by winds, involved extremely high altitudes, and often poor visibility. Once a pilot was over The Hump, though, he could breathe a sigh of relief.

I'd say the Himalayan Mountain range is one serious hump.

A more current example from The Chicago Tribune: "All the money PSG has thrown around in the last few seasons has proven to do nothing to get the team over the hump, simply because money is not the problem."

"Hump day" means Wednesday, regarded as the midpoint of a typical working week, when people begin to look forward to the weekend. Some people, unable to wait until Friday, celebrate hump day because they've made it over the hump.

Lillördag, or "little Saturday," is a Nordic tradition of turning Wednesday evening into a small weekend-like celebration.

The phrase was used in a 1975 song called *Friday* by American artist JJ Cale. The song refers to Wednesday as hump day several times and talks about getting over the hump and the week being half gone.

I like JJ Cale's song *After Midnight*. But, since it celebrates the idea of "letting it all hang out," it's probably more appropriate for Saturday than for Wednesday.

SHAKE A STICK AT

If you say that there are "more things than you can shake a stick at," you are emphasizing in a humorous way that there are a lot of them.

In the *Lancaster Journal* of Pennsylvania, 5 August 1818: "We have in Lancaster as many Taverns as you can shake a stick at." But why would you "shake a stick" at a tavern? Shaking a stick at somebody is a threatening gesture, or one of defiance, and taverns welcome you inside to drink, party, and be happy.

So, where does this odd phrase come from? Nobody knows, but there are many guesses.

—It may derive from the counting of farm animals, pointing one's stick at each in turn. But you would point a stick when counting, not shake it.

—Counting aids such as tally sticks appear in the Upper Paleolithic Age, some 25,000 to 35,000 years ago, in the form of notched bones. So, a stick may be used to count, but you still don't shake it; you cut notches in it.

—A shepherd might shake a stick at a predator, but there may be times when there are too many to shake a stick at (making your efforts futile).

—One can harvest berries by shaking or thrashing the berry bushes with a stick. Olive-growers do the same thing with olive trees.

—In the late 1700s and early 1800s, "to shake a stick at" was often used in descriptions of fights with walking sticks, or canes. "To shake one's stick at"

someone (literally) was to threaten. There are several examples of people trying to threaten, coerce, or control a group of people, or dogs, by "shaking a stick" at them.

—It might have come from the Native American practice of counting coup, in which merit was gained by touching a vanquished enemy in battle. But I cannot see the connection.

—Perhaps it arose from the play at warfare by small boys. George Washington Jones flourishes a triumphant wooden sword over the many British soldiers who surrendered at Yorktown. More, in fact, than he could wave his "stick" at. But that's not "shaking" a stick; that's wielding a sword!

—Farmers once controlled their sheep by shaking their staffs to indicate where the animals should go. When farmers had more sheep than they could control, it was said they had "more than you can shake a stick at."

My choice is the last option. But the small boy waving a wooden sword in a pretend battle also makes a lot of sense.

SHRINKING VIOLET

A "shrinking violet" is a shy or retiring person who doesn't want to attract attention or engage with strangers. The term appears to have been first used in the literal sense, describing the modest wood violet, in the early 1800s by poet and essayist Leigh Hunt. The idiom came into use about the end of the 1800s.

The idea behind the expression arose from the wild European sweet violet, *Viola odorata*, which was brought to North America by colonists. Wild violets are dainty plants whose small, delicate flowers are often hidden among its leaves. They grow in shady spots and are frequently inconspicuous among larger and more aggressive plants. The sense of shrinking is not that of becoming smaller, or of recoiling from something distasteful, but of being shy and self-effacing.

By the 1890s, violets had become very popular in Europe and North America and were the third most important commercially grown flower, often sold on street corners. Part of the appeal was the flower's sweet aroma. The active chemical constituent of the scent briefly inhibits the sense of smell. Violets were added to the rushes on the floors of medieval houses to sweeten rooms and posies were carried by ladies to block out the stink of the streets.

The idiom is often used in a negative sense, as in, "When it comes to competition, he's no shrinking violet."

I can relate to that. When it comes to chocolate peanut butter ice cream, I'm no shrinking violet either.

SMOKE AND MIRRORS

The expression "smoke and mirrors" alludes to the performances of stage conjurers who use actual smoke and mirrors to create an illusion which deceives the audience. The expression is now commonly used to refer to the practice of twisting the truth by spin doctors and the like to deceive the general public. These tricks obscure the truth, usually through distraction, misdirection, or partial truths.

"Smoke and mirrors" is a classic technique in magical illusions that makes an entity appear to hover in empty space. It was documented as early as 1770 and spread widely after its use by the charlatan Johann Georg Schröpfer, who claimed the apparitions to be conjured spirits. Later it became a fixture of 1800s phantasmagoria shows. The illusion relies on a hidden projector (known then as a magic lantern), the beam of which reflects off a mirror into a cloud of smoke, which in turn scatters the beam to portray illusions of the floatation, existence, and disappearance of objects.

An illusion is either something that isn't there at all or looks like something that it isn't. Magicians rely on illusions, but there are illusions everywhere, and we all have them. Reckless people may have the illusion that they can't get hurt or die; people who overspend may have the illusion that they'll never have to pay off their credit cards. When an illusion is dispelled, you're left with the truth, which can be wonderful, or awful, or anywhere in between.

The earliest known use of the idiom "smoke and mirrors" came from the biography *How the Good Guys Finally Won: Notes from an Impeachment Summer*, published in 1975. It was written by American political journalist James Breslin, who accounted the Watergate political scandal in Washington firsthand. Towards the end of the 20th century, the term became commonly used to describe the complex system of political culture and affairs in the media and publications across the world. The application of the idiom "smoke and mirrors" in politics also led to the book *Smoke and Mirrors: The War on Drugs and the Politics of Failure*, published by journalist Dan Baum.

A related term is "smokescreen," which originally referred to literal smoke meant to hide military forces in advance of an attack. That sense has been found since at least 1915, and smokescreen has been a metaphor since the 1920s.

March 29 is National Smoke and Mirrors Day, a day that recognizes an uncommon profession and a common personality type: the magician and the deceiver, respectively.

Well, if people think magicians and deceivers deserve a day dedicated to them, can I please have December 15th designated as National Chocolate Fudge-Making Day?

SNAKE OIL

The Oxford English Dictionary defines snake oil as "a quack remedy or panacea." It's also used to describe deceptive marketing, health care fraud, or a scam. Similarly, "snake oil salesman" is a common label used to describe a quack, huckster, or charlatan.

The term comes from the "snake oil" that used to be sold as a cure-all elixir. In the 1700s and 1800s, many American and European entrepreneurs sold mineral oil (often mixed with various herbs, spices, and drugs, but containing no snake-derived substances whatsoever) as "snake oil liniment," making claims about its efficacy as a panacea. Patent medicines were common from the 1700s to the 1900s, particularly among vendors masking addictive drugs such as cocaine, amphetamine, alcohol, and opium, to be sold at medicine shows.

Professional pharmacy journals began to condemn it in the early 1900s, not because it was quackery but because products sold under the name had no real snake oil in them. There were no federal regulations in the United States concerning the safety and effectiveness of drugs until the 1906 Pure Food and Drug Act.

A folk remedy containing snake oil, especially from rattlesnakes, actually existed in rural regions of the US. Snake oil in this sense is attested by 1858: it was said to heal rheumatism and gout in Georgia but was touted as a cure for deafness in rural Pennsylvania. Today, "snake oil" simply means "poppycock" or "nonsense."

Another theory exists for the popularity of snake oil remedies. Oil from Chinese water snakes has for centuries been used in Chinese traditional medicine to treat joint pain such as arthritis and bursitis. The use of snake oil in the US may have originated in the mid-1800s with the thousands of Chinese railway laborers, who worked long days of physical toil. Chinese snake oil may have had real benefits due to its high concentration of an omega-3 fatty acid, more than that of salmon.

"Snake oil," for some reason I fail to understand, is also the name of a perfume. And a board game. And a cocktail company, whatever that is. And

the name of a whiskey.

SPITBALLING

"Spitballing" started life with the following meanings:

—paper chewed and rolled into a ball thrown or shot as a missile

—a baseball pitch delivered after the ball has been moistened with saliva or sweat

Now it also means the art of tossing out random ideas just to see what sticks.

The earliest use of the word, in the late 1700s, was for an item that seems to have been used for blacking shoes. By the 1830s, the modern spitball had arrived, used to describe one of the annoying things that schoolchildren do.

Spitball was sometimes used in a figurative manner, but largely continued as the "paper chewed and rolled into a ball to be thrown or shot as a missile." However, at the beginning of the 1900s, baseball pitchers discovered that adding a little of their saliva to a baseball would cause it to behave in an unpredictable fashion. Usually a noun, it did not take long for spitball to be employed as a verb.

Suddenly, around the 1950s, the word acquired a new meaning. This new sense of spitball might be defined as "to suggest ideas, especially those that are jocular, improbable, or impractical."

"I'm just spitballing here, Mannie, but you get the idea."

— John Crosby, *The Daily Times* (Salisbury, MD), 4 Aug. 1950

This new sense of spitball is often assumed to have come from advertising jargon, which is a distinct possibility but unconfirmed. It is similarly unclear how this new sense came about, though I can imagine someone saying, "I'll toss you an idea. See if it sticks." That that made someone think of "spitball," and brainstorming became spitballing.

Spitballing as "tossing out random ideas" has been used long enough and widely enough, that we think it will stick around for some time.

STUPID IS AS STUPID DOES

This proverb, "stupid is as stupid does," was apparently modeled on "handsome is as handsome does." It's been around since at least 1862 but was popularized by the 1994 film *Forrest Gump*.

In the movie, Forrest Gump, the main character, was asked several times if

he was stupid. He replied, "Stupid is as stupid does," meaning that a person should be judged by his actions, not his appearance.

A related phrase is "actions speak louder than words," which was first recorded somewhere around 1200 CE. But even the smartest people do stupid things sometimes. And some of them make comments about it.

—Never ascribe to malice that which is adequately explained by stupidity. (Napoleon, 1769-1821, French Emperor)

—Two things are infinite: the universe and human stupidity; and I'm not sure about the universe. (Albert Einstein)

There are, of course, many euphemisms for "stupid." Here are a few that make me smile:

- not playing with a full deck
- he's depriving some village of an idiot
- a few screws short of a hardware store
- has an IQ lower than plant life
- not the quickest bunny in the forest
- any slower and he'd need to be watered once a week
- half a bubble off plumb
- thick as two short planks

TWO AXE HANDLES WIDE

An "axe" is a cutting tool that consists of a heavy sharp-edged head fixed to a handle, used especially for felling trees and chopping wood. They've been around since cavemen first figured out how to attach a flint knife to a wooden club.

Recently, the *Oklahoman* quoted a man as saying that he had run across the term " (so many) axe handles wide" and it reminded him of his boyhood in Arkansas, where certain things were described as some number of axe handles wide or long.

Paul Bunyan's fabulous, enormous blue ox, "Babe," was "six axe handles between the eyes." An axe handle is about 27 inches, give or take. Some are longer. But six axe handles at 27 inches adds up to 13.5 feet between the eyes for Babe. Fabulous indeed!

Many old-time measurements continue in use. The width of motor cars was derived from width of a wagon or buggy, equivalent to width of a span of mules or team of horses. Width of our highways was established by ruts caused by two horse-drawn vehicles passing on a muddy road.

Land measurements were imaginative before surveying became sophisticated. For example, a Tennessee deed specified 200 acres beginning at "a spring branch Spanish oak and running south 164 poles to the hickory (tree)," and so on. Another specified measurements from "a post oak marked with an X, 57 varas to a Spanish oak marked with a JX," etc. Streams also defined boundaries.

A "vara" is a Texas unit of length equal to 33.33 inches. The word was borrowed from the Spanish word for pole, originating from the Latin *vāra* which meant any of various branched structures or implements.

My father, when teasing my mother, used to say that she was "two axe handles across the rear." Instead of getting annoyed, perhaps she should simply have sat on him.

UP TO SNUFF

"Up to snuff" is an American expression which means meeting the required standard or of sufficient quantity and quality, not easily deceived, adequate, acceptable, in good health. "Up to scratch" is used more in British and Australian English.

We don't know the source. But the phrase seems to have its literary debut in a work by one John Poole in 1810, where it meant "not easily deceived." In the 1823 revision of *Grose's Classical Dictionary of the Vulgar Tongue*, the phrase "up to snuff, and a pinch above it" is glossed as "to be flash." Flash itself was defined as "understanding another's meaning."

The 1934 *Webster's Unabridged Dictionary* includes that definition and adds two more: "in full fettle; up to scratch." The 1961 *Unabridged* adds "sophisticated; worldly-wise" as well as "in good shape or normal condition, up to an accepted standard."

The snuff in "up to snuff" is the pulverized tobacco that is chewed, inhaled into the nose, or placed against the gums, introduced to Britain in the 1500s. Snuff became very popular, a habit of the fashionable and sophisticated. The snuff was expensive and so were the elaborate, decorative boxes it was kept in.

It became so popular that other phrases popped up. To "beat to snuff" meant you beat an opponent so badly that they were pulverized to powder. "In high snuff" described someone in high spirits, possibly a nod to the buzz you'd get after using tobacco or drinking coffee.

"Up to scratch" has its origin in boxing. At the beginning of the match and each round, boxers were required to stand with their toes against the

scratch, a line drawn across the prize ring floor. A boxer who could not do so was unable to come up to scratch, and therefore not up to snuff.

Snuff may still be popular with some people, but I'd rather get my highs from chocolate.

WATCHING PAINT DRY

"Watching paint dry" is an idiom which describes some activity as being particularly boring. A similar phrase is "watching grass grow."

The expression was well known by the late 1900s and has led to real-life activities. In 2012, the *World Watching Paint Dry* championships were held by online trade merchants to promote various brands of paint. Entries were received from all over the world.

Charles Tomlinson delivered a lecture on the "Drying Properties of Various Kinds of House Paint" to the *Royal Society of Arts* in 1869. Another lecture, titled "Why Watching Paint Dry Is Interesting," was published in 2008 by the *Royal Society of Chemistry*. In 2016, scientists set up a computer simulation of paint drying, showing that it forms into two layers spontaneously as small particles in the paint combine and push away larger ones. One researcher said that the particles used in coatings have sizes 1,000 times smaller than the width of a human hair, so seeing the process requires a microscope. Apparently, watching paint dry is not boring if you're in the paint business.

The drying process is observed to better understand how paint dries and forms a protective layer. This is particularly important for the marine and shipbuilding industries, to help them develop coatings that comply with increasingly strict regulations. Findings may help to enhance a range of products, including cosmetics and pharmaceuticals.

In 2016, director Charlie Shackleton released a 10-hour-and-7-minute-long film of paint drying titled *Paint Drying* as a protest against the requirement for the British Board of Film Classification to approve films, and charge per minute for their obligatory service. The board had to watch all of it to be able to classify it. They gave it a U certificate, ("suitable for all"), and charged £5,936.

It's hard to say who won that lengthy spat.

I'm just going to sit around and watch cats sleep.



LEGALITIES

LAW is a set of rules created and enforced by social or governmental institutions to regulate behavior, with precise definitions a matter of longstanding debate. It has been described, in terms of justice, both as science and art. The law shapes politics, economics, history and society in various ways and also serves as a mediator of relations between people.

Now that we've disposed of the serious side, let's discuss "The law is an ass." This originally English expression is used when the rigid application of the letter of the law is contrary to common sense.

The ass being referred to here is a donkey. Donkeys have a somewhat unjustified reputation for obstinance and stupidity. It is the stupidly rigid application of the law that this phrase calls into question.

"The law is an ass" comes from a play, *Revenge for Honour*, published by the English dramatist George Chapman in 1654.

Many reference works and websites have attributed the phrase to Charles Dickens, who used it in *Oliver Twist*, which was published in 1838. But, though Dickens didn't create it, he brought the phrase to the general public and made it popular. *Oliver Twist* was an enormous success when it was first published as a serial and has become one of the world's best-selling novels.

LAWYER is the name for a person who practices law. A lawyer can be classified as an advocate, government lawyer, attorney, barrister, canon lawyer, civil law notary, counsel, counselor, solicitor, legal executive, or public servant. Such work generally involves the practical application of abstract legal theories and knowledge to solve specific problems.

Roman advocates were barred from taking fees until the ban was abolished by the emperor Claudius, who legalized advocacy as a profession and allowed the Roman advocates to become the first lawyers who could practice legally. But he also imposed a fee ceiling of 10,000 *sesterces*. This was not much money; the *Satires* of Juvenal complained that there was no money in working as an advocate.

Lawyers make easy targets when it comes to humor. As a result, there are something like two million and three lawyer jokes, accumulated over centuries. It seems almost like a national pastime. Or international, perhaps. But, if you're going into law, I guess you learn to put up with them.

Here's one from long ago, in *The Beggar's Opera*, written by John Gay (1685-1732), English dramatist.

A fox may steal your hens, Sir,
A whore your health and pence, Sir,
Your daughter rob your chest, Sir,
Your wife may steal your rest, Sir,
A thief your goods and plate.
But this is all but picking,
With rest, pence, chest and chicken;
It ever was decreed, Sir,
If a lawyer's hand is fee'd, Sir,
He steals your whole estate.

We must be fair to other professions. Here is one shot covering two:

Q. What happened to the banker who went to law school?

A. Now she's a loan shark.

I certainly can't leave out accountants, since I used to be one:

An accountant dies and goes to Heaven.

"There must be some mistake," the accountant argues. "I'm too young to die. I'm only 55."

"Impossible," says Saint Peter. "According to our calculations, you're 82."

"How'd you get that figure?" the accountant asks.

Answers St. Peter, "We added up your timesheets."

Here's an ancient one about doctors:

It's a crabby verse from Martial, a Roman poet who lived in the first century CE. In his poems he satirises city life and the scandalous activities of his acquaintances, and romanticises his provincial upbringing. He wrote 1,561 epigrams, has been called the greatest Latin epigrammatist, and is considered the creator of the modern epigram.

Dialus was a doctor once,
But now he's a mortician;
It's just a change of titles, though;
It's still the same position.

Last and best are two funnies about the police:

A police recruit was asked during an exam, "What would you do if you had to arrest your own mother?" He said, "Call for backup."

This one was the 2003 Darwin Award Winner and my all-time favorite:

A thief burst into a Florida bank one day wearing a ski mask and carrying a gun. Aiming his gun at the guard, the thief yelled, "FREEZE, MOTHER-STICKERS, THIS IS A FUCKUP!"

For a moment, everyone was silent. Then the snickers started. The guard completely lost it and doubled over laughing. That probably saved his life, because he'd been about to draw his gun. He couldn't have drawn and fired before the thief got him.

The thief, unable to deal with the unexpected reaction, ran away and is still at large. In memory of the event, the banker later put a plaque on the wall, engraved with the words, "Freeze, mother-stickers, this is a ****up!"

KILL ALL THE LAWYERS

"Let's kill all the lawyers" is one of Shakespeare's most famous lines, from *Henry VI*. The full quote is: "The first thing we do, let's kill all the lawyers."

These words are spoken by the villainous character, Dick the Butcher. Dick is a murderer and the right-hand-man of Jack Cade, who is leading a rebellion against King Henry. Cade and Dick are aggressively anti-intellectual. They want and need, like all tyrants, to remove the guardians of independent thinking. They kill anyone "with ink on their fingers," those who can read and write, and they burn all the books and documents they encounter. They know they can take over an ignorant population much easier than one where everyone understands their rights.

Dick the Butcher's proposal was intended to eliminate those who might stand in the way of a revolution — thus underscoring the important role that lawyers can play in society. One of the central functions of lawyers is to tell tyrants that they can't do what they want to do.

The line has been interpreted in different ways:

- criticism of how lawyers maintain the privilege of the wealthy and powerful;
- implicit praise of how lawyers stand in the way of violent mobs;
- criticism of bureaucracy and perversions of the rule of law.

It's important to us to maintain a fair rule of law that protects all the people. Whether lawyers symbolize evil or good is almost irrelevant; the most important thing about this quote is the upholding of something essential for our way of life: a fair and just law system.

Supreme Court Justice John Paul Stevens shared this reading of the line, even analyzing it in a 1985 decision: "As a careful reading of that text will reveal, Shakespeare insightfully realized that disposing of lawyers is a step in the direction of a totalitarian form of government."

But, as scholar Daniel Kornstein notes in his book *Kill all the Lawyers: Shakespeare's Legal Appeal*, this quote could also have been a class-focused

criticism of lawyers, a group of professionals committed to securing the interests of the wealthy.

But Kornstein is generalizing. Not all lawyers are committed to serving the wealthy and powerful. Some are, of course, confirming that humanity has both good guys and bad guys in every line of work. Some doctors are quacks, some accountants are cheats. No profession can be free of those who prefer a fast buck over honest service to the public.

The great trial lawyer Daniel Webster said—"Justice is the greatest concern of man on earth." Lawyers play many vital roles on the world's stage but none more important than preserving, protecting, and perpetuating the rights of citizens, both individual and business.

Lawyers also protect the rights of even the most hated, reviled persons in society, petty criminals, flag burners, murderers, even the likes of Ted Bundy.

An address to graduating lawyers said, "If you're doing your job right you should be unpopular because it will always be unpopular to tell people that they should put aside prejudices, intolerance, bigotry, and hatred and behave like civilised human beings."

MURPHY'S LAW

Murphy's Law is an adage typically stated as: "Anything that can go wrong will go wrong."

"Murphy" is by far the most frequently found surname of Irish origin with well over 50,000 bearers of the name in Ireland alone. It's also slang for a potato. But the name was not chosen for the adage because of its popularity.

The perversity of the universe has long been a subject of comment. The familiar version of Murphy's Law is less than 100 years old, but the essential idea behind it has been around for centuries. Magician Adam Hull Shirk wrote in the 1928 essay, *On Getting Out of Things*, that in a magic act, nine out of 10 things that can go wrong usually will. Even before this, it was called Sod's Law, which states that any bad thing that can happen to some poor sod will happen. In fact, Murphy's Law is still referred to as Sod's Law in England.

The law's modern name supposedly has its roots in an attempt to use new measurement devices developed in 1949 by Edward A. Murphy, Jr., an engineer in the US Air Force. Although Captain Murphy took part in other engineering design tests in his military and civilian careers, it was one particular test that gave rise to Murphy's Law.

In 1949, at Edwards Air Force Base in California, officers were conducting tests to determine once and for all how many Gs — the force of gravity — a human being could withstand. They hoped their findings could be applied to future airplane designs.

The project team used a rocket sled dubbed the "Gee Whiz" to simulate the force of an airplane crash. The sled traveled more than 200 miles per hour down a half-mile track, coming to an abrupt stop in less than a second. But, to find out just how much force a person could take, the team needed an actual person to experience it. Colonel John Paul Stapp, a career physician for the Air Force, volunteered to ride the rocket sled. Over the course of several months, Stapp suffered broken bones, concussions, and broken blood vessels in his eyes, all in the name of science.

Murphy attended one of the tests, bearing a gift: a set of sensors that could be applied to the harness that held Dr. Stapp to the rocket sled. These sensors were capable of measuring the exact amount of G-force applied when the rocket sled came to a sudden stop, making the data more reliable.

Apparently, the first test after Murphy hooked up his sensors to the harness produced a reading of zero. All the sensors had two ways of being connected, and every one was installed the wrong way.

When Murphy discovered the mistake, he grumbled about the technician, who was allegedly blamed for the foul-up. Murphy said something like, "If there are two ways to do something, and one of those ways will result in disaster, he'll do it that way."

Shortly thereafter, Murphy headed back to Wright Airfield where he was stationed. But Stapp, known for his sense of humor and quick wit, recognized the universality of what Murphy had said, and in a press conference he mentioned that the rocket sled team's good safety record was due to its awareness of Murphy's Law. He told the press that it meant, "Whatever can go wrong, will go wrong."

And that's where it began. Murphy's Law turned up in aerospace publications and then in popular culture, including books, Web sites, and a movie. Several bands are named after Murphy's Law, and it's also a popular name for Irish pubs and taverns around the world.

The study of thermodynamics — how energy changes from one form to another — tells us that, in our universe, systems tend to become more and more disordered. Entropy, the second law of thermodynamics, supports Murphy's Law's claim that whatever can go wrong, will.

Incidentally, the third law of thermodynamics indicates that perfect order is practically impossible. The Scottish version was written by Burns: "The best laid schemes o' mice an' men gang aft a-gley."

In 1948, humorist Paul Jennings coined the term "resistentialism," a play on resistance and existentialism, to describe "seemingly spiteful behavior manifested by inanimate objects," where objects that cause problems (like lost keys or a runaway bouncy ball) are said to exhibit a high degree of malice toward humans.

Richard Dawkins, on the other hand, says Murphy's Law and Sod's Law are nonsense because they require inanimate objects to have desires of their own. He points out that a certain class of events may occur all the time, but are only noticed when they become a nuisance. He gives, as an example, aircraft noise interfering with filming. Aircraft are always in the sky, but aren't noticed until they cause a problem.

Scientists, of course, know that inanimate objects have no emotions. But I find it much more fun to pretend my car keys are trying to get away from me rather than admit that it was my clumsiness that caused them to fall on the floor.

Shrewd observers of life have come up with their own laws. Some have become famous, like the Peter Principle, which states that all people will eventually be promoted to their level of incompetence, or O'Toole's Commentary on Murphy's Law, which argues that Murphy was an optimist. There are literally thousands of rules, laws, principles, and observations that have been created since Murphy's Law. Some are funny, some are wise, and some are just plain cool.

Murphy's Law is a sound universal concept, but it does play into our underlying sense of fatalism, the idea that we're all powerless in the hands of fate. Murphy's Law shows us that if given a chance to do something wrong, statistics show we'll do so only around half of the time. But our powerlessness feels more like 1005, when we always seem to be stuck in the slowest lane of traffic.

An awareness of Murphy's Law has caused designers to install fail-safes. There are many examples. Some are systems that use limited choices to reduce errors, like the mismatched prong sizes on an electrical plug. Others are mechanisms that prevent matters going from bad to worse, like lawnmowers that have levers that must be held down for the mower to operate. If the person operating the mower lets go of the lever, the lawnmower stops running.

Fail-safes are also referred to as "idiot-proof." This leads us to Grave's Law,

which states, "If you make something idiot-proof, the world will create a better idiot."

Finally, from the *Scientific American*, an article entitled: *The Science of Murphy's Law*: Life's little annoyances are not as random as they seem: the awful truth is that the universe is against you.

MURPHY'S MAXIMS — A MINI SELECTION

Each of these sayings explains some aspect of the universe and puts it into an easily understood form.

Murphy's First Law: Anything that can go wrong will go wrong.

Murphy's Third Law: Everything takes longer than you think it will.

Murphy's Thirteenth Law: Every solution breeds new problems.

Laws by Murphy's friends:

O'Toole's Commentary — Murphy was an optimist.

Etorre's Observation — The other line moves faster.

Acton's Law — Power corrupts, absolute power corrupts absolutely.

Boob's Law — You always find something in the last place you look.

Clarke's Third Law — Any sufficiently advanced society is indistinguishable from magic.

Franklin's Rule — Blessed is he who expects nothing, for he will not be disappointed.

Issawi's Law — A shortcut is the longest distance between two points.

Ralph's Observation — Never allow any mechanical object to realize you are in a hurry.

Henry Luce's Law — No good deed goes unpunished.

Mathis' Rule — It is bad luck to be superstitious.

Preudhomme's Law of Window Cleaning — It's on the other side.

Wethern's Law — Assumption is the mother of all screw-ups.

Finagle's Rule — Teamwork is essential. It allows you to blame someone else.

Gerhardt's Law — If you find something you like, buy a lifetime supply. They are going to stop making it.

Handy Guide to Modern Science:

1. If it's green or it wriggles, it's biology.
2. If it stinks, it's chemistry.
3. If it doesn't work, it's physics.

Cerf's Extensions to the Handy Guide to Modern Science:

4. If it's incomprehensible, it's mathematics.
5. If it doesn't make sense, it's either economics or psychology.

Miscellaneous Science Guides:

- Law of Invisible Phenomena: Absence of evidence is not evidence of absence.
- The length of a minute depends on which side of the bathroom door you're on.
- The Law of Self-Sacrifice: When you starve with a tiger, the tiger starves last.
- The Law of Motivation: Creativity is great, but plagiarism is faster.
- The only perfect science is hind-sight.
- Change is inevitable, except from a vending machine.
- Law of Drunkenness: You can't fall off the floor.
- Discovery: A couple of months in the laboratory can frequently save a couple of hours in the library.

Murphy's Military Laws:

- Never forget that your weapon is made by the lowest bidder.
- The best defense is to stay out of range.

Murphy's Technology Laws

- You can't tell which way the train went by looking at the track.
- Logic is a systematic method of coming confidently to the wrong conclusion.
- The attention span of a computer is only as long as its electrical cord.
- Garbage in, garbage out.
- To err is human, but to really foul things up requires a computer.
- Tell a man there are 300 billion stars in the universe and he'll believe you. Tell him a bench has wet paint on it and he'll have to touch to be sure.
- A failure will not appear till a unit has passed final inspection.
- New systems generate new problems.
- When all else fails, read the instructions.
- Any instrument when dropped will roll into the least accessible corner.
- Under the most rigorously controlled conditions of pressure, temperature, volume, humidity, and other variables the organism will do as it damn well pleases.

Murphy's Laws of sex:

- Nothing improves with age.
- Sex takes up the least amount of time and causes the most amount of trouble.
- Sex appeal is 50% of what you've got and 50% of what people think you've got.
- If you get them by the balls, their hearts and minds will follow.
- One good turn gets most of the blankets.
- Love is the triumph of imagination over intelligence.

Murphy's Miscellaneous Meanderings:

- A clean tie attracts the soup of the day.
- Failure is not an option. It comes bundled with the software.
- Experience is something you don't get until just after you need it.
- Never ask a barber if you need a haircut.
- The book you spent \$40.95 for today will come out in paperback tomorrow.
- Cream rises to the top. So does scum.
- Nothing is as easy as it looks.
- If everything seems to be going well, you have obviously overlooked something.
- It is impossible to make anything foolproof because fools are so ingenious.
- Whenever you set out to do something, something else must be done first.
- Mother nature is a bitch.

Since I am a veteran card-player, these are my favorites:

- Trust everybody, but cut the cards.
- Never do card tricks for the group you play poker with.
- A Smith and Wesson beats four aces.

THE PETER PRINCIPLE

"The Peter Principle" is a management concept developed in the 1960s by Dr. Laurence J. Peter, a psychologist and professor of education. The concept states that people in a hierarchy tend to be promoted up to their level of incompetence, or, as Dr. Peter went on to say in simpler terms, "The cream rises until it sours."

In theory, promoted employees are already familiar with the inner workings of the company and have a good grasp of its goals. But, if they lack the skills needed for the new roles, they will be incompetent at the new level, and will be stuck there.

For example, a good schoolteacher may make a competent assistant principal, excellent at dealing with students, parents, and other teachers. But as principal, she might be poor at maintaining good relations with the school board and superintendent.

If a promoted employee no longer has confidence in his abilities, he may produce less for the company than he did in his previous position in which he excelled. He's likely to make bad decisions, including who to promote. Eventually, the higher levels of a bureaucracy become populated entirely by incompetent people. The promoted employee, if mediocre in his new position, may spend a lot of time covering up his incompetence.

Since the bulk of the company productivity is usually carried out by the regular employees who form the base of the hierarchical pyramid,

companies can operate indefinitely, so long as the incompetence of the higher levels doesn't result in catastrophic decisions.

An employee who wants a bigger paycheck, higher status, and a corner office will work his tail off to get a promotion. Once he gets it, he relaxes and works at normal speed. To an outsider, it appears that the promotion triggered the decline in work, when instead, the productivity demonstrated before the promotion was artificial.

This is also seen in human courtship rituals. When a man finds a potential mate, he'll spend much time and energy on making himself appear attractive and interesting. When a commitment is reached, the amount of time and energy spent on these pursuits inevitably declines, what some refer to as "letting yourself go."

The English historian C. Northcote Parkinson wrote in 1955 that "work expands so as to fill the time available for its completion." Like the Peter Principle and Murphy's Law, Parkinson's Law is a tongue-in-cheek revelation of what may be a universal truth.

Perhaps the best way to address the Peter Principle in a corporation would be to demote employees—without the stigma of failure—to their most appropriate level of work competence. But the supervisor who made the poor promotion decision would have to admit he made a mistake, an act not often found in the higher levels of a hierarchy.

Another solution to the Peter Principle calls for higher pay without promotions. Employees often accept a promotion—not for the power and prestige—but the increased pay attached to it. If companies were willing to offer large pay increases for excellent work within the same position, the Peter Principle would be averted, and the employee could make more money while staying in the position he enjoys and in which he's competent.

Another solution for an incompetent employee is to promote him laterally or give him a longer title with less responsibility. This way the employee still feels important but is kept from causing trouble. Of course, an employee can simply turn down a promotion if he feels it's beyond his capability, an action Peter referred to as Peter's Parry.

The Dilbert principle, a satirical concept of management developed by Scott Adams, states that companies tend to promote incompetent employees to management to minimize their ability to harm productivity. In the Dilbert comic strip of February 5, 1995, Dogbert says that "leadership is nature's way of removing morons from the productive flow." This is what Laurence J. Peter explains as the act of "kicking a person upstairs."

In the concluding chapter of Dr. Peter's book, he applies his principle to the entire human species and asks whether humanity can survive in the long run, or whether it will become extinct upon reaching its level of incompetence as technology advances.

Well, this human may go extinct if cell phones become any more complicated.



PLAIN TALK

Plain talk is clear, easily understandable, and unambiguous. It means to speak bluntly, directly, and truthfully, even if what is being said is undesirable to the listener. To talk plainly is to say what the facts are and to speak about unpleasant things in an honest way. Some people call it talking turkey.

Gardeners may be interested to learn that there is a rose, a medium red Floribunda, called *Plain Talk*. It is, according to the catalogue, prolific in blooming, vigorous, short, bushy, and almost thornless. I'm not a gardener, but I think I'd like that rose.

In this chapter, I'm going to talk about defecating, urinating, and passing gas. In plain talk, shitting, pissing, and farting.

There's always been much propaganda about "polite" terms being preferable to "rude" terms. But, if you look at the facts, is shit smellier than excrement or No. 2? Is piss yellower than urine or No. 1? Is farting louder than passing gas? Of course not. Euphemisms don't change the facts.

The slang words for emitting human waste are frowned on as unacceptable. But that's because humans have, for thousands of years, been trying to deny that we're animals and that all animals produce body waste. We create romantic and lengthy rituals for eating, but when what's left of the food is ejected, nobody's supposed to talk about it or even acknowledge that it exists.

Oh, I get it. Human waste isn't pretty, and it smells bad, and we want life to be lovely and smell sweet. Okay. But let's not pretend that euphemisms will achieve that.

And, thanks to [Mental Floss](#), here are a whole bunch of euphemisms used to describe that place where we hide ourselves to make the bad smells.

John — after Sir John Harrington, who attempted to create modern flush toilets.

Crapper — after Thomas Crapper, another toilet innovator.

Necessary House — the term dates to the early 1600s; before it was a necessary house, people would sometimes call it a necessary place, necessary vault, or necessary stool.

Head — a Naval term that comes from the bathroom's placement in the head, or bow, of a ship, where water splashing up from the ocean would clean the area. "Head" has been used in this way since the early 1700s, according to the *Oxford English Dictionary*.

Shankie and Cludgie — delightful Scots terms for toilets, from the 1970s.

Garderobe — once used to refer to a storeroom. By the 1680s, it was another name for a privy or toilet. Or, as one writer put it at the time, a place for "the private deeds of Nature."

FDR — Franklin Delano Roosevelt's New Deal included the 2.3 million outhouses built in rural communities around the US. The wooden outdoor structures—which had concrete foundations and chimneys for ventilation—came to be known as FDRs, Roosevelt Buildings, or Federal Buildings.

Dunnekin and Dunny — a dunnekin (or dunegan, according to Francis Grose's 1811 *Dictionary in the Vulgar Tongue*) is slang from the late 1700s for an outhouse. Its origins are unknown, but the *OED* speculates that it might be derived from the word dung. According to *The New Partridge Dictionary of Slang and Unconventional English*, it's "thought to be a compound of 'danna' (excrement) and 'ken' (house)." Australians call it 'dunny.'

Bum Fodder — a term also used to refer to badly-written literature, is defined as "soft paper for the necessary house."

Closestool — "A chamber implement," according to Samuel Johnson's 1759 *Dictionary of the English Language*. Or, as Merriam-Webster puts it, "a stool holding a chamber pot."

Looking-Glass, Jockem Gage, Remedy Critch, and Member Mug — all slang terms for a chamber pot, as seen in Grose's *Dictionary in the Vulgar Tongue*.

Little Office — If you're an Australian in need of a bathroom break, you might head to your little office. (Just don't take a Zoom meeting in there.)

Telephone — U.S. college students in the 1970s excused themselves to go to the toilet by saying they needed to use the telephone. Very unimaginative!

Thelma Ritter and Skyscraper — Head to the Thelma Ritter (rhyming slang for "shitter,") and, when you're done, use skyscraper (toilet paper) to wipe your fife and drum (that would be your bum).

Film for Your Brownie — toilet paper, this time a pun on Kodak's Brownie camera, dating to the early 1970s. (You'll know you've used enough film for

your brownie when you draw an ace—otherwise known, according to Green's *Dictionary of Slang*, as "producing a clean sheet of toilet paper, having wiped one's anus thoroughly.")

Crapping Case — a water closet; it can also be known as a crapping castle, according to *The Slang Dictionary: Etymological, Historical, and Anecdotal*, published in 1874.

Khazi — initially a term borrowed into English from the Italian casa, meaning "house," this British term came to mean "toilet" in the 1930s and started out as casey or carsey before becoming khazi in the 1970s. As the OED notes, the change "may result from association with the title of the character the Khasi of Khalabar in the 1968 film Carry On Up the Khyber, in which Khasi puns fancifully (and offensively) on this word."

Gutbucket — a slang term with a few meanings—and since the 1940s, "toilet" has been one of them.

Bog House — *Slang and Its Analogues Past and Present* notes that bog house or bog shop are slang terms for "a privy; a necessary house." The OED says the terms may have been formed simply by joining bog—"a piece of wet spongy ground"—with the words house and shop. It's also possible that bog house is a form of boggard, a 1500s word for a privy. (I've heard English people call it simply "the bog.") Thus, toilet paper is "bog roll."

Biffy — a US slang term for the toilet dating to the 1940s. Canadian, too.

KYBO — According to *The Concise New Partridge Dictionary of Slang and Unconventional English*, this name for an outdoor toilet is an acronym from the '70s for Keep Your Bowels in Order.

Loo — a British word derived from the French phrase *gardez l'eau*, meaning "watch out for the water."

Restroom — originally, circa 1887, "a room set aside for rest and quiet" (in a workplace or public building). As these later were required to have accessory toilet-rooms, by the 1930s the word came to be a euphemism for lavatory or toilet. Canadians say "washroom."

Lavatory — from the Latin *lavatorium*, meaning "wash basin" or "washroom." It was common in the 1800s but now more often refers to public toilets in Britain. The abbreviation "lav" is commonly used in British English.

Powder room — In the early 1920s, it was considered improper for women to mention using the bathroom for normal bodily functions, which is why the

term “powder room” started making the rounds. It was also where women often went to touch up their makeup, which is why men did not use the term. Women still say, “I’m going to powder my nose.”

Dumpsite — a place where garbage or refuse is dumped. Very apt!

In addition, we use somewhat less interesting terms, such as “ladies’ room,” “men’s room,” and “public convenience.” I’m sure there are others. After all, we’ve been communicating with one another for millions of years. Oh yes, and pissing for longer than that.

PISS

To “piss” is to urinate, to discharge the fluid secreted by the kidneys and stored in the urinary bladder. In humans and other animals, this process is normal and necessary. Adult humans urinate up to seven times a day. In some animals, urination can also mark territory or express submissiveness.

However, in many societies, people regard “piss” as a swear word, a profanity. Even mentioning the desire to urinate is seen as a social transgression, despite it being a universal need. Such people probably use one of the many euphemisms listed below. In plain-speaking circles, people use the many slang expressions, also listed below.

The proper Latin verb meaning to urinate was *mingere*, which resulted in medical words like micturition. Via the medieval French verb *pissier* (1100s), “to piss” crops up in many medieval English texts. The Vulgar Latin verb was *pissiare*.

Two early examples of use:

—He shall not piss my money against the wall; he shall not have my money to spend in liquor. (Grose, *Classical Dictionary of the Vulgar Tongue*, 3rd edition, 1796)

—He who once a good name gets,
May piss a bed, and say he sweats.
(*Dictionary of Buckish Slang, University Wit and Pickpocket Eloquence*, London, 1811)

SYNONYMS / EUPHEMISMS

- pee (also the letter p and the British penny, 1788)
- peepee (also slang for penis, 1923)
- wee-wee (also slang for penis)
- piddle
- tinkle

- wizz
- void
- go number one
- go potty
- squirt
- micturate
- take a leak (Shakespeare's *Henry IV*, 1590s)
- make water
- relieve oneself
- shake hands with an old friend
- answer the call of nature
- pop a squat (outdoor female urination)
- go to see my aunt (British)
- go to see a man about a dog (British)
- spend a penny (British coin-operated pay toilets)
- drain the dragon (dragon is slang for penis)
- off to take a Chinese singing lesson (Australian, from the tinkling sound of urination against the China porcelain of a toilet bowl)

SLANG EXPRESSIONS

piss off — to anger someone; to leave in a hurry
piss off! — express contempt; tell to leave (1946)
pissed off — angry
pissy — irritable, angry, pissed off
piss on — treat contemptuously
piss on it! — who cares!
on the piss — British, drinking heavily at a pub or bar
piss on a nettle — annoyed, uneasy, anxious
pissing down — refers to heavy rain
pissing contest — an unproductive ego-driven battle
pisshead — someone who drinks too much alcohol
piss ant — a worthless person (some ant colonies have a urine-like odor)
piss up a rope — to partake in a futile activity
piss into the wind — to act in ways that cause self-harm
piss away — to squander or use wastefully (1948)
take the piss — to take liberties, be unreasonable, mock another person
full of piss and vinegar — energetic or ambitious (1942)
piss up — British expression for drinking to get drunk
pissed — drunk in Britain or angry in the US (1929)
piss-prophet — one who diagnoses diseases by inspection of urine (1620s)
piss proud — having an erect penis on awakening (1796)
no pot to piss in — to have no money or possessions
piss about/around — to waste time
piss (someone) about/around — to be unfair or dishonest
piss and moan — to complain in a constant or annoying way
piss like a racehorse — US, to urinate a large amount

piss yourself (laughing) — to laugh very hard
piss-poor — very poor (1940)
piss-ugly — very ugly
pissing while — a short time (1550s)
piss-a-bed — French *pissenlit*, dandelion (which is a diuretic)
pmail — the feline version of email
cock a leg — the way dogs do it
take care of business — do what needs to be done

PISSING IN COLOR:

In our bodies, bilirubin is a major breakdown product of red blood cells. Some bilirubin is absorbed into the bloodstream and eventually excreted, giving urine its yellowish glow. If the kidneys secrete a lot of water, the urine is pale yellow. But when the body needs to conserve liquids, the urine is darker. This may occur after heavy exercise and sweating. Very dark yellow urine can be a sign of dehydration.

If liver function is impaired, the urine takes on a greenish appearance. But a genetic trait possessed by some will lead to green urine after eating asparagus. Similarly, about 15% of people will produce red urine after eating beets.

While red urine is frightening because it may indicate blood and can be a sign of kidney or bladder problems, there's another innocent cause. For example, drummers can have red urine because the repeated tapping of the fingers and hands can cause red blood cells to burst, releasing their hemoglobin into the urine. In some parts of Africa, the contention is that if a drummer doesn't piss red, he is not playing well!

Doctors in the Middle Ages included specialists known as "piss prophets," who examined the color of urine, looking for signs of disease. One wonders how many people were subjected to nonsensical treatments merely because they'd eaten beets or asparagus.

However, Middle Ages piss prophets also used odor to diagnose problems and the doctors of today pay attention to both color and odor. Urine is mostly waste products and water and normally has a mild smell, a bit like ammonia.

Food, vitamins, and medications are the most common cause of a bad urine smell. For example, foods that convert to sulphur compounds in your body can smell like rotten eggs. But a sweet smell may stem from diabetes, and can also be caused by dehydration, a yeast infection, or a genetic condition. Strong-smelling urine can signal liver disease and kidney stones. If your pee smells strange for more than a day or two, talk to your piss prophet.

PISSING IN ART:

Piss Flowers are a group of bronze sculptures — enameled white to imitate plaster — that resemble flowers. These are considered to be conceptual artist Helen Chadwick's most important sculptural works. They were shown at the Serpentine Gallery in 1994 as part of a solo exhibition appropriately titled *Effluvia*.

During a residency at the Banff Arts Centre, Canada in 1991, Chadwick and her partner David Notarius made daily visits to snow areas. There they would place a flower-shaped metal mold onto a mound of snow, taking turns to urinate into it. They then poured plaster into the shapes created. From these casts, bronze versions were made and mounted onto pedestals resembling bulbs. The downward path of the hot urine through snow is inverted to form a flower reaching upwards.

The review said, "Piss Flowers are at once repulsive as they are beautiful, and it is this combination that typifies Chadwick's work — aesthetic beauty created out of an alliance of unconventional, often vile materials."

The reviewer, when he referred to "vile materials," must have meant the snow.

FART

The noun "fart" means gas generated in the stomach or bowels. The verb "to fart" means to expel intestinal gas from the anus. In medical language, "fart" is flatulence or flatus. "To fart" is to pass flatus. "Flatus" comes from the Latin word meaning "the act of blowing." The scientific study is called flatology.

Fart comes from the Old English word *feortan*, which means "to break wind." It is one of the oldest words in the English lexicon, originating in Indo-European languages. There are many synonyms (see below). It existed first as a verb, in use since the 13th century, and as a noun from the 15th. It is not currently considered polite. However, the word has been used by many fine scribes (and almost all four-year-olds) over the years.

Farting is a universal, routine, and daily human experience. And, though much of society regards it as rude and offensive, farts are funny. But why? We're often embarrassed by our own, so why do they make us laugh?

There are three major theories about laughter. One says we laugh when we feel a sudden sense of superiority over a person, which slapstick humor provides. The second is the incongruity theory, which says we laugh at things that don't usually go together, such as a talking dog, or a purple cat. The third says we relieve nervous tension over socially taboo situations by

laughing at them. Such laughter produces a "pleasant psychological shift."

So, it's no surprise that the world's oldest recorded joke was a fart joke. Researchers at England's University of Wolverhampton traced an ancient joke, about a woman who may or may not have tooted in her husband's lap, all the way back to Sumer in 1900 BCE. That's close to 4,000 years ago!

Saint Augustine, in *The City of God* (5th century CE) mentions men who "have such command of their bowels, that they can break wind continuously at will, so as to produce the effect of singing." Singing? On the other hand, in the Medieval period, the phrase "not worth a fart" would be applied to an item held to be worthless.

It's impolite to talk about bottom burps in certain company. But some of history's most celebrated thinkers wrote about them. William Shakespeare was a master of the fart joke, as evidenced in works like *A Comedy of Errors*. And, in *The Canterbury Tales*, Geoffrey Chaucer had a character "let fly a fart as loud as it had been a thunderclap."

Many classic works feature fart jokes. Examples: Dante's *The Inferno*, Aristophanes' *The Clouds*, and J.D. Salinger's *The Catcher In The Rye*. James Joyce often used the word in letters to Nora Barnacle, his wife and long-time muse. Benjamin Franklin prepared an essay on the topic for the Royal Academy of Brussels in 1781, urging scientific study rather than all the unseemly levity. Mark Twain's spoof, *1601*, features farting. One conversation has a character describe a fart as "this rich o'ermastering fog, this fragrant gloom."

Farts have also been turned into performance art. In the late 1800s, a French baker named Joseph Pujol would often entertain his customers by sucking air into his rectum, then expelling it in such a way that he could actually imitate different instruments and sounds. He took his act on the road, and adopted the stage name Le Pétomane—meaning "fart maniac"—and wowed the crowds with his talent for passing wind at will. Another was England's Mr. Methane, a.k.a. the King of Farts.

Most people avoid talking about farts. This is especially true in academic and professional settings. But sociologists who interviewed college students regarding their feelings about farting found that women were likely to worry that people hearing them fart would find it disgusting, while men were likely to think it was funny.

Often the word is considered merely a common profanity with an often-humorous connotation. Calling somebody "an old fart," for example, is sometimes an insult and sometimes a colloquial term of endearment.

Everyone farts. Gas is essentially the by-product of swallowed air mixing with the bacteria and other organic compounds in your large intestine. Then it finds its way out of your body via a wild intestinal roller coaster ride to your rear-end. Typically, adults produce about two pints of gas each day, which sneaks—or leaks—out via an average of 14 farts a day. Research has found no significant difference between the amount that younger and older people fart. Likewise, there is no notable difference between the sexes.

Only 1% of the gases expelled in farts smell bad, though the odors can be intense. These include foul-smelling gases such as hydrogen sulfide or sulphur. More than 99% of the gas that people pass consists of just nitrogen, oxygen, carbon dioxide, hydrogen, and methane. Methane and hydrogen are flammable, and so flatus can be ignited if it contains adequate amounts of these components.

Flatulence-producing foods are typically high in certain polysaccharides. Those foods include beans, lentils, dairy products, onions, garlic, leeks, turnips, radishes, potatoes, cashews, Jerusalem artichokes, oats, wheat, and yeast in breads. Cauliflower, broccoli, cabbage, Brussels sprouts, and other cruciferous vegetables are commonly reputed to not only increase flatulence, but to increase the odor. Other culprits are carbonated drinks, artificial sweeteners, and certain medicines, such as ibuprofen, laxatives, antifungal medicines, or statins. Some infections are also associated with flatulence.

Your farts probably aren't as stinky to you as they are to everyone else. The more familiar we are with something, the more likely we are to prefer it. This goes for music, art, and, yes, even thunder from down under. Biologists tell us that survival in nature may depend on the detection of and reaction to foreign scents.

If you'd rather avoid the sulfur-like smell of any farts, there's a pill for that. In 2014, a French inventor named Christian Poincheval claimed he could turn your flatus from sour to sweet with a pill that will make your gas smell like chocolate. If chocolate isn't your thing, there are rose, violet, ginger, and lily of the valley varieties, too. And before that, in 1998, an inventor received a patent for the first undergarment that contained a replaceable charcoal filter. He received the Ig Nobel Prize for Biology for his invention.

There's no scientific evidence that links how loud a fart is to its smell (or lack thereof). Some of them are silent but deadly. Some are loud but benign.

It's impossible to hold in a fart for very long. If you're lucky, it will escape quietly and over an extended period of time, so you won't be suspected as the one who dealt it. But if you're not so lucky, holding in a stinker could force it to come tumbling out louder than it would have in the first place.

Interest in the causes of flatulence was spurred by high-altitude flight and human spaceflight; the low atmospheric pressure, confined conditions, and stresses peculiar to those endeavours were cause for concern. No kidding!

We know that many animals fart, and for some of them, it can be a genuine matter of life or death. The Bolson pupfish, a fish found in northern Mexico, feeds on algae and can accidentally ingest the gas bubbles that algae produce in warm temperatures. If the air finds its way into the fish's intestines, that makes it difficult for the fish to swim. If it doesn't fart to remove the air, it's likely to die—either from being attacked by a predator when it floats to the top of the water, or because the gas bubbles rupture its intestines.

One of the most notorious animal farters is the termite, which lives in colonies of millions. Thus, when each termite lets a half microgram of methane loose per day, it adds up to about 20 million tons of methane per year, or 1-3% of global methane emissions.

However, while livestock account for around 20% of global methane emissions, 90-95% of that is released by exhaling or burping.

ODDMENTS

Farts can be visible in cold air. I wonder who was so dedicated to science that he agreed to let his ass hang out in below freezing weather to test this theory.

Case studies—including a 2013 paper in the *Archives of Sexual Behavior*—have been written about individuals who are aroused by flatulence, a proclivity known as "eproctophilia." Whatever floats your boat, I guess.

Thomas Wolfe had the phrase "a fizzing and sulphuric fart" cut out of his 1929 work *Look Homeward, Angel* by his publisher. Ernest Hemingway, who had the same publisher, accepted the principle that "fart" could be cut, on the grounds that words should not be used purely to shock. Whyever not?

Since the 1970s, farting has increasingly been featured in film, especially comedies such as *Blazing Saddles* and *Scooby-Doo*. A fiction film, *Thunderpants*, was released in 2002.

The whoopee cushion is a joking device invented in the early 1900s for simulating a fart. In 2008, a farting application for the iPhone earned nearly \$10,000 in one day.

A farting game named *Touch Wood* was documented by John Gregory Bourke in the 1890s.

The Canadian Broadcasting Corporation aired *Does It Fart?*, a series for kids about all the amazing creatures who pass gas, by combining science, entertainment, and humor to provide what they termed, "one smell of a good time."

Canada's Parliament once argued about the appropriateness of using the word fart on the chamber floor. The debate erupted in November 2016. And was tabled for further study.

One Australian boss got sued for allegedly farting too much. While he denied being a serial fart attacker, he did acknowledge it was possible that he had let a few go near the complainant. The court dismissed the case.

FART SLANG

Fart around — waste time in activities that have no serious purpose.

Brain fart — a momentary lapse in attention or memory.

Funny as a fart in a spacesuit — not funny at all.

At sparrow-fart — very early in the morning.

Fart in a windstorm — something entirely insignificant.

Pissed as a fart — drunk.

SYNONYMS / EUPHEMISMS:

air biscuit — *Green's Dictionary of Slang* says it's "an extremely malodorous fart or belch." The act of farting or belching is known as floating an air biscuit.

bottom burp — *Green's* notes that this is "generally children's usage."

break wind — to expel gas from the intestine (1500s).

Bronx cheer — when you make a fart noise with your mouth (1908).

bum crack — according to the OED, obsolete and dates to 1604.

cut one — a shortened version of "cut the cheese."

cut the cheese — According to *Green's*, this phrase relates to "the pronounced odor of certain cheeses." *Lexicon Balatronicum: A Dictionary of Buckish Slang, University Wit, and Pickpocket Eloquence* (1811) defined the word "cheeser" as "a strong-smelling fart."

empty house is better than a bad tenant — this is what you say in New Zealand after you've farted in public. In other words, it's better out than in.

fartick or fartkin — From the early 1900s and means a tiny toot.

fizzle — In the 1500s, this word meant "to defecate." But by the mid-1600s, it also meant to fart. An example from 1653: "The false old trot did so fizzle and foist, that she stunk like a hundred devils."

flatuosity — appeared in the 1500s, 200 years before flatulence.

foist — To break wind silently (1500s). In other words, flatulence that's silent but deadly.

one-cheek squeak — According to *Green's*, "an instance of breaking wind."

pass gas — short and simple phrase, and the words rhyme.

petarade — a fart or series of farts (Oxford English Dictionary). English seems to have no other single word which means "a series of farts" or "a gunshot of farting."

prat whids — prat (from pratfall) is 1500s British slang for the buttocks. Whid is slang meaning "to speak" or "to lie." So, this phrase literally means "buttock speaks."

pumpernickel — from the German words *pumpern* (to break wind) and *nickel* (goblin).

raspberry tart — rhyming slang, later shortened to "raspberry," and occasionally abbreviated further to "razz." This was associated with the phrase "blowing a raspberry." Other rhyming slang for fart: horse and cart, hart and dart, and D'Oyley Carte.

rim slide — According to *Green's*, this is a prison slang term from the '80s for "a silent but foul-smelling fart," helpfully noting that "the fart slides from the rim of the anus."

ringbark — used in New Zealand for breaking wind. *Reed's Dictionary of New Zealand Slang* (2003) notes that "ring is old slang for the anus."

rouser — meaning "a loud fart," first appeared in 1713, according to the *OED*. Jonathan Swift used it memorably in his 1731 poem *Strephon and Chloe*.

tail scutter — an Irish slang term for a fart, from the mid-1960s.

toot — a short, sharp sound made by a horn. Or an anus.

trump — dates to the 1400s. It's derived from the sound of a trumpet.

ventosity — from the Latin *ventosus*, meaning "windy" or "flatulent," and as an added benefit, has the secondary meaning of "pompous inflated conceit or boasting."

Euphemisms are created to solve the problem of what society considers unacceptable language. But they sometimes create problems themselves, often with children, who are inclined to take things literally. A little girl said to her mother, "Excuse me! I farted."

The mother said, "You are being very polite. But a more polite way of saying that would be to use the words, 'I broke wind.'"

The child thought for a minute, then said, "How can the wind break?"

Explain that one!

Out of all the ways there are of describing a fart, my favorite comes from the *Urban Dictionary*: a turd honking for the right-of-way.

SHIT

As a noun, "shit" refers to fecal matter, the solid waste expelled from the body. As a verb it means the act of defecating, of expelling feces. We all do it, other animals do it, and even the universe shits out new stars.

"Shit" has been with us, in written form, since at least the 1300s, and is derived from Old English. Also, scholars are fairly certain that it was used by preliterate Germanic tribes in the time of the Roman empire, meaning that the word "shit" is, quite literally, barbaric.

It was taboo from circa 1600 CE and rarely appeared in print (you won't find it in Shakespeare!), and even in the "vulgar" publications of the late 1700s it is disguised by dashes. It drew the wrath of censors as late as 1922, scandalized magazine subscribers in 1957, and was omitted from some dictionaries as recently as 1970. As an exclamation, it was attested in print by 1920 but is certainly older. After all, its use to mean "obnoxious person" appeared by 1508.

SYNONYMS

- poo or poo-poo
- poop (pooped also means "tired")
- doo-doo (baby talk for shit, since 1948)
- caca (also a Spanish term for excrement)
- crap (from Dutch *krappen* and French *crappe*)
- crud (waste, or something of poor quality)
- excrement (1525)

- excreta (borrowed from Latin)
- ordure (from Latin word *horridus*)
- dung (animal poop)
- guano (seabird and bat shit, used for fertilizer)
- droppings (animal dung)
- manure (used in agriculture)
- scat (used re animals)
- soil (from a French verb meaning "to dirty")
- night soil (feces collected at night to use as fertilizer)
- muck (dung, decaying vegetable matter, 1200)
- coprolite (fossilized animal dung, 1820)
- feculence (from Latin, meaning full of dregs, 1425)
- dookie (dog dookie, worthless)
- scheisse (Germany's favorite swear word)
- bowel movement (food waste your body has rejected)
- stool (medical jargon)
- waste (unwanted or unusable material)
- turd (a lump of excrement)
- jobbie (Scottish word for shit)
- do a job (do a specific project or chore)
- tom tit (Cockney rhyming slang for shit)
- do some business (do what is wanted or needed)

SLANG EXPRESSIONS

- shit — nonsense, foolishness — "He's full of shit!"
- unfair treatment — "She won't take shit from anyone."
 - little value or poor quality — "My car is a piece of shit."
 - valuable, used in a negative way — "They don't know shit."
 - stuff — "He left his shit all over the place."
 - unpleasant or dangerous situation — "I'm in the shit."
 - narcotic drugs, especially heroin.
 - an annoying, offensive person — "He's a piece of shit."
 - used as an intensive — "You scared the shit out of me."
 - to deceive or trick — "Are you shitting me?"
- shite — variant of shit, chiefly British.
- shit! — interjection — "Shit! That really hurt!"
- oh, shit! — dismay — "Here she comes."
- no shit! — surprise — "They got married." "No shit!"
- no shit! — ironic — "It's cold out there." "No shit."
- hot shit — something excellent — "I bought hot shit boots!"
- like shit — very bad — "I feel like shit."
- in deep shit — in a lot of trouble — "Oops!"
- up shit creek — in trouble (1868).
- shit happens — bad things happen and can't be prevented.
- give a shit — usually negative — "I don't give a shit what happens."
- not give a shit — not care.

fall in shit and come up smelling like a rose — be very lucky
get your shit together — manage your affairs.
shit or get off the pot — stop wasting time; put up or shut up.
bullshit — attempt to deceive.
the shits — diarrhea, awful, disgusting.
take a shit — defecate.
take a dump — imitate a dump truck by defecating.
shit yourself — become so afraid or surprised that you defecate.
shit bricks — to be very frightened.
scared shitless — to be very frightened.
answer nature's call — defecate or urinate.
shit fit — an uncontrolled outburst of anger or frustration.
shit list — a list of those one dislikes.
shit show — event marked by chaos.
shit storm — event marked by violent controversy.
shit ton — a large amount.
shitload — a large amount.
tough shit — used to express a lack of sympathy.
mood enhancer — defecation after a lengthy period of constipation.
go to the bathroom — use the toilet.
shit-faced — drunk.
shit-hole — rectum, undesirable places.
same shit different day — no change from yesterday.
built like a brick shithouse — large, strong, tough, shapely.
shit out of luck — nothing ever goes your way.
shithouse luck — unexpected food fortune, very lucky.
shitticism — Robert Frost's word for scatological writing.
shit for brains — extremely stupid.
chickenshit — worthless or contemptible.

The final slang term is "when the shit hits the fan," which provides an all too vivid word picture. I wouldn't want to be in front of that fan, would you? It describes circumstances where control is lost, resulting in major trouble. It alludes to a crisis, the messy and hectic consequences brought about by a previously secret situation becoming public.

It originated in the 1930s in Canada according to Eric Partridge's *A Dictionary of Slang and Unconventional English*. The earliest known example in print is in *Gyrene*, a novel by W. D. Jones, circa 1943. The more polite forms of the phrase, which involve eggs, pie, soup, and "stuff" hitting the fan, can certainly be dated from the 1940s US. It has spawned many variants, including "when the pooh hits the punka wallah."

Here's a totally untrue urban legend, of how the word "shit" originated. The story explains that, in the 1800s, cow pies were collected from the prairie to be used as fuel on ships during long voyages because they weighed less

than other forms of fuel. Of course, if the cow patties got wet, they weighed more and began to ferment. Methane would build up below decks, and eventually explode. So, to avoid this danger, the boxes of cow pies had to be kept high up in the ship, away from the lower holds. Thus, they were stamped *Ship High In Transit*, which was eventually shortened to SHIT. It's a great story, but "shit" appeared in the language at least as early as the 1300s.

If you want a guide to eco-friendly outdoor defecation, there's a book called *How to Shit in the Woods*, by Kathleen Meyer. Meyer examines the environmental impact of too much crap (organic and otherwise) on our wild outdoors and provides techniques for keeping the wilderness clean when indoor plumbing is not an option. Meyer shares proper procedures, including recommendations for equipment. The back-page blurb says the book has information that's crucial for anyone looking to be wiser with their waste.

Why is shit brown instead of, perhaps, pink? Mostly because of bilirubin, a major breakdown product of red blood cells. Its precursor is the green compound, biliverdin, which sometimes makes feces green. This happens when transit time through the digestive tract is rapid. Babies will often have quick transit times and produce bright green stools.

Now for the list which always makes me laugh. So much, in fact, that even though I used it in my book *Baa Baa Black Sheep, Have You Any Words?* I couldn't resist adding it here as well. Enjoy the lovely rude ways of applying "shit" to religion and philosophy.

Taoism — Shit happens.

Confucianism — Confucius say, "Shit happens."

Buddhism — If shit happens, it isn't really shit.

Zen Buddhism — What is the sound of shit happening?

Hinduism — This shit happened before.

Mormonism — This shit is going to happen again.

Islam — If shit happens, it is the Will of Allah.

Stoicism — This shit is its own reward.

Protestantism — Let this shit happen to someone else.

Calvinism — Shit happens because you don't work hard enough.

Pentecostalism — In Jesus' name, heal this shit!

Catholicism — Shit happens because you deserve it.

Judaism — Why does this shit always happen to us?

Zoroastrianism — Shit happens half the time.

Marxism — This shit is going to hit the fan.

Atheism — No shit.

Seventh Day Adventist — No shit on Saturdays.

Existentialism — Absurd shit.

Agnosticism — What is this shit?

Deconstruction — Shit happens in hegemonic meta-narratives.

Christian Science — Shit is in your mind.

Moonies — Only happy shit really happens.

Jehovah's Witnesses — Knock, Knock, shit happens.

Scientology — Shit happens on page 152 of *Dianetics* by L. Ron Hubbard

Hare Krishna— Shit happens, Rama Rama.

Hedonism — There's nothing like a good shit happening.

Nihilism — Who gives a shit?

Rastafarianism — Let's roll this shit and smoke it.

I am now officially pooped from talking about poop.



TICK TACK TOE

"Alliteration" is a literary term meaning that words beginning with the same sound are placed close together. Although alliteration often involves repetition of letters, most importantly, it is a repetition of sounds.

The word comes from the Latin word *littera*, meaning "letter of the alphabet." It was first coined in a Latin dialogue by the Italian Giovanni Pontano in the 1400s.

Today, alliteration is used to please the ear in many languages around the world. It is used in poetry, novels, music lyrics, article titles in magazines and newspapers, advertisements, business names, comic strips, television shows, video games, and in the dialogue and naming of cartoon characters.

It's popular because the repetition of sounds at the beginning of words allows rhythm and musicality. It also makes a phrase easy to memorize and fun to read or say out loud.

Alliteration is used to good effect in poetry and fiction. For example, the phrase "Singing songs of the seaside" utilizes the "s" sound. This gives the phrase a soft and smooth sound. For another, the phrase "Keep that crazy cat out!" uses a hard "k" sound. This gives the phrase a harsh sound and adds a threatening tone.

Samuel Taylor Coleridge uses alliteration in "Rime of the Ancient Mariner."
The fair breeze blew, the white foam flew,
The furrow followed free;
We were the first that ever burst
Into that silent sea.

That verse certainly beats, "Peter Piper picked a peck of pickled peppers."

TICK

The noun "tick" is an old word, which has acquired several meanings over the centuries. It arose from Middle English *tek* or "little touch" in the 1300s. "Tickle" is probably a derivative of that early version of tick. The verb "tick" originally meant "to touch or pat." Another kind of tick is a small blood-sucking parasite. This nastier tick has a different root, the Old English *ticia*.

As someone said, every creature on the planet has its place in nature, but the tick is an abomination.

Used as a noun, "tick" has the following meanings:

—a light, sharp, clicking sound made repeatedly by a machine, such as a clock, a constant reminder that time is passing.

—a moment, a second, or a shake (chiefly British); "two shakes of a lamb's tail."

—a small amount, a speck, a particle.

—a light written mark used to check off or call attention to an item or indicate its correctness or selection; the tick over the letter 'i'; "place a tick in the appropriate box."

—a unit on a scale; a degree; "when interest rates move up a tick."

—any movement of a stock's price; an upward/downward tick. The stock ticker was named for its characteristic sound when printing.

—credit or an amount of credit, (chiefly British); "to buy on tick."

—a small contrasting spot of color on the coat of a mammal or the feathers of a bird.

—a slight touch or tap, a pat.

—a score, account, or reckoning.

—a name given to many plants of the leguminous genus *Desmodium*, which have joined pods roughened with minute hooked hairs by which the joints adhere to clothing and to the fleece of sheep. "Tick beans" are small, hard beans fed to horses.

—a strong cloth case for a mattress or pillow.

—a light mattress without inner springs.

—short for ticking (a strong cotton fabric, often striped, used for mattress covers)

—any of numerous small, parasitic arachnids (*Ixodida*) that feed on the blood of animals. Many ticks transmit febrile diseases, such as Rocky Mountain spotted fever and Lyme disease.

—any of various usually wingless insects that resemble a tick, such as a sheep ked.

Used as a verb, "tick" means any of the following:

—to emit recurring clicking sounds; "the clock ticked away the minutes."

—to function characteristically or well. If you talk about what makes someone tick, you are talking about the basic drive or motivation of a person.

— to touch or tap something lightly, or with a small sharp sound, as a bird when picking up its food, or as in the game of tag.

—to mark or check off (a listed item) with a small dot, mark, or electronic signal, or use it as a reminder or to call attention to something. "She ticked off each item in the list."

—to count or record with the sound of ticks; "a meter ticking off the cab fare."

—to touch with a momentary glancing blow.

—to give tick; to trust.

As with many old words that have several meanings, there are many idioms and slang expressions arising from them. Here we go!

tick off — to make someone angry or annoyed

— to criticize someone who has done something wrong

— to place a mark beside a listed item to show you've dealt with it

ticked — angry

be back in a tick — be back in a moment, a jiffy

full as a tick — engorged with food or drink, like a tick full of blood

half a tick — half a second

a few ticks — a few seconds or minutes

tight as a tick — drunk; swollen near to bursting; miserly

get something on tick — agree to pay for it later

tick all the right boxes — fulfill all the necessary requirements

tick down — to count the time down to zero

tick away/by — if time ticks away or by, it goes past

tick-tock — the sound a clock makes

tick-tack-toe — a game played on a nine-square form, using O and X

ticker — a heart, an electronic screen that shows share prices

tick over — function

blue tick — on social media, it indicates an account has been verified

bluetick coon hound — a dog used to hunt raccoons

tick box — a small square on a form which you can tick for various reasons

tick-bird — an oxpecker (starling), which eats insects off animals' backs

what makes you tick — what makes you behave a certain way (feelings,

opinions)

What makes me tick is food. Breakfast, lunch, dinner, snacks in between. Without food, my body wouldn't function, would it?

TACK

The simple word "tack" has been around for a long time, since at least the 1300s, and has developed several meanings. It arose from Middle English *takken*, from *tak*, a fastener, rope tying down the windward corner of a sail.

As a noun, tack has the following meanings.

- a small, sharp broad-headed nail.
- a long stitch used to sew fabrics together temporarily, a basting stitch.
- a zigzag movement on land.
- a course or method of action, a possible way of dealing with something.
- harness such as saddle and bridle for a horse (perhaps short for tackle).
- stickiness, such as that of a newly painted surface.
- food, especially coarse or inferior foodstuffs.

As a verb, tack has these meanings:

- attach or fix in place with tacks, add hastily, as in tack on a happy ending.
- add as something extra, used with "on" or "onto."
- in sailing, to change course by turning the boat into the wind; to follow a course against the wind by a series of tacks; to follow a zigzag course; to modify one's attitude abruptly. It can also refer to the direction that a ship is sailing in as it moves at an angle to the direction of the wind; or to a change from one direction to another direction; or to the distance traveled while sailing in a particular direction.

Tack began to mean "course or method of action" near the end of the 1600s; within 100 years or so, the phrase "change tack" meant "change direction."

Phrases containing tack:

- tie tack — an ornamented pin to keep your tie from blowing in the wind.
- tack claw — a small hand tool for removing tacks.
- ticky-tacky — inferior materials; uninspired or monotonous sameness.
- tacky — sticky; in poor taste.
- on the wrong tack — under a false impression, astray.
- change tack — diverge from the course previously followed.
- hardtack — dense long-lasting biscuit, tooth-breaker.

Thumb tacks are useful but also lethal, if stepped on with a bare foot.

TOE

A "toe" is any one of the five long, movable parts at the end of your foot. Your toes are to your feet what your fingers are to your hands. The word is very old, known to be in use before the tenth century.

The word has acquired several meanings over the centuries. As a noun, it can be defined in the following ways.

- one of the terminal members of the vertebrate foot
- the fore end of a foot or hoof
- the forepart of something worn on the foot: the toe of a boot
- something that looks like a toe: the toe of Italy
- the lowest part: as of an embankment, dam, or cliff

As a verb, "toe" has the following meanings.

- to touch, reach, or drive with the toe: to toe a football
- to furnish with a toe: to toe a sock
- to drive (something, such as a nail) obliquely to clinch or fasten
- drive a golf ball with the toe of the club (part of the clubhead farthest from the shaft)

Toes help us to walk, providing balance, weight-bearing, and thrust during gait, for which the big toe is the most important.

The toes all have names, of course.

- the first: hallux, big toe, great toe, thumb toe
- the second: index toe, pointer toe
- the third: middle toe
- the fourth: fore toe, ring toe
- the fifth: baby toe, little toe, pinky toe, small toe

The fourth toe may be called the ring toe, but I suspect you can wear rings on any toe.

"Polydactyl" is the term for a baby human or other animal being born with more than five toes on each foot, or more than five fingers on each hand. There are other long words associated with toes. For example, dogs are "digitigrade" because they walk on their toes. Humans are "plantigrade," meaning we walk with our toes flat against the ground, our weight on the soles of our feet.

Many things can go wrong with toes and perhaps the most common thing we do is stub them (also known as a "sprain"). Ingrown nails are painful and so are gout attacks on the big toe. There are several deformities, such as hammer toe, trigger toe, and claw toe. Some can be caused by rheumatoid arthritis or diabetes.

Another common problem involving the big toe is the formation of bunions. These are structural deformities of the bones and the joint between the foot and big toe and may be painful. A similar deformity involving the fifth or baby toe is described as tailor's bunion or bunionette. "Bunionette" is a cute name, but I'll bet the problem is as painful as a bunion.

Here are some common toe phrases:

on one's toes — alert, ready to act

toe-to-toe — in close combat or at close quarters

toe the line (or mark) — conform to a rule or standard

put a toe in the water — tentatively do something new

head (or top) to toe — completely encompassing the body

toe dance — a dance performed on tiptoe, especially ballet

toe shoe — a dance slipper used for ballet; a shoe with individual toe pockets

tread on someone's toes — offend someone, or encroach on their affairs

tiptoe — walk quietly on one's toes; avoid a difficult subject

toe in/toe out — wheel geometry of a vehicle; feet placed aslant

make some-one's toes curl — cause someone to feel a strong emotion

toe jam — sticky matter between one's toes

turn up one's toes — die

toe tag — a paper label attached to the toe of a deceased person

a toe in the door — a chance to do something new and better

heel-and-toe — a stride in which the heel of the front foot touches the ground before the toe of the rear one leaves it, as in walking races; also, a polka

And let's not forget the popular nursery rhyme called "This Little Piggy."

This little piggy went to market,

This little piggy stayed home,

This little piggy had roast beef,

This little piggy had none.

This little piggy went ...

Wee, wee, wee, all the way home!

The rhyme is usually counted out on a toddler's toes, each line corresponding to a different toe, usually starting with the big toe, and ending with the little toe. The first known full version was recorded in *The Famous Tommy Thumb's Little Story-Book*, published in London about 1760.

The nursery rhyme also inspired Agatha Christie to write a novel called *Five Little Pigs*.

I will do a heel-and-toe out to the hall, tiptoe past a closed bedroom door, put a toe in the water with a new kind of coffee. Then I'll be on my toes and ready to go toe-to-toe with the English language to make it toe the line. I refuse to turn up my toes until that's done.

TICK-TACK-TOE

"Tick-tack-toe" is a game in which two players take turns in drawing either an 'O' or an 'X' in one square of a three-by-three grid consisting of nine squares. The winner is the first player to get three of the same symbols in a straight horizontal, vertical, or diagonal line.

The name may come from "tick-tack," the name of an old version of backgammon first described in 1558. It can be spelled in any of these ways: tick-tack-toe, tic-tac-toe, tick-tat-toe, or tit-tat-toe. In Commonwealth English, it's called noughts and crosses. "Nought" is an older name for the number zero, while "cross" refers to the X shape.

There is no universally agreed rule as to who plays first and it really doesn't matter, because if played optimally by both players, the game always ends in a draw, making tic-tac-toe a futile game. It is often used in schools to teach good sportsmanship and in the branch of artificial intelligence that deals with the searching of game trees.

Games played on three-in-a-row boards can be traced back to ancient Egypt, where such boards have been found on roofing tiles dating from around 1300 BCE.

An early variation of tic-tac-toe was played in the Roman Empire, around the first century BCE. It was called *terni lapilli* (three pebbles at a time) and, instead of having any number of pieces, each player had only three; thus, they had to move them around to empty spaces to keep playing. The game's grid markings have been found chalked all over Rome.

In 1952, OXO (Noughts and Crosses), developed by British computer scientist Sandy Douglas for the EDSAC computer at the University of Cambridge, became one of the first known video games.

A song "Tit, Tac, Toe" was published in 1876.

Arcade games with tic-tac-toe-playing chickens were popular in the mid-1970s; the animals were trained using operant conditioning, with the moves being chosen by computer and indicated to the chicken with a light invisible to the human player.

Such game shows as *Hollywood Squares*, *Hip Hop Squares*, the British *Celebrity Squares* and Australia's *Personality Squares* and *All-Star Squares* have all used the tick-tack-toe game as the basis for their games.

On *Minute to Win It*, the game Ping Tac Toe has one contestant playing the

game with nine water-filled glasses and white and orange ping-pong balls, trying to get three in a row of either color into the glasses. The contestant must alternate colors after each successful landing and must be careful not to block himself.

So, who will I root for, me or myself?



QUICK BITES

MUDDY THE WATERS — make a situation confusing by introducing complications (1600s).

SHOOT THE BREEZE (THE BULL) — have a casual conversation, idle chat.

FAIR GAME — person considered a reasonable target for criticism, exploitation, or attack.

FLEET OF FOOT — able to run fast.

ON FOOT — walking rather than riding (1300).

UP ONE'S ALLEY — well suited to one's tastes, interests, or abilities.

HOT AS A TWO-DOLLAR PISTOL — very hot in temperature, very angry, stolen.

BRIGHT AS A NEW PENNY — shining, especially intelligent, astute, or perceptive.

SLICK AS A WHISTLE — smooth, quick, easy, skillful (1830).

SLICKER THAN A BOILED ONION — dishonest (Texas saying).



SQUARE

The word "square" is old, and useful, and has many meanings. It can be a noun, a verb, an adjective, or an adverb, depending on context. It comes, circa the 1200s, from Anglo-French *esquarre*, from Vulgar Latin *exquadra*.

Used as a noun, it can mean any of the following:

- a rectangle with all four sides equal, a square shape
- a small area of open land in a city or town, often in the shape of a square (1790s)
- quadrilateral space marked on a board game
- mason's tool for measuring right angles, carpenter's square
- a conventional, precise, formal, old-fashioned person (1940s)
- the result of multiplying a number by itself
- an unopened cotton flower with its enclosing bracts
- a body of troops (1590s)

As an adjective, it can mean:

- having four equal sides and four right angles
- used with length measurement to express the total size of an area
- equal or level
- forming a right angle: "a square corner"
- raised to the second power
- being of a specified length in each of two equal dimensions: "10 feet square"
- exactly adjusted, precisely constructed, or aligned, in accord with
- just (1560s), fair, honest, equitable, true, fitting, proper
- of body parts, sturdy, strongly built (late 1300s)
- straight, direct (1804)
- of accounts, even, leaving no balance (1859)
- in harmony or exact agreement, correctly, aligned

As a verb, the word has synonyms such as accord, agree, conform, fit, tally:

- to multiply a number by itself: "raise to the second power"
- to make square or rectangular in shape: "square a building stone"
- to bring approximately to a right angle: "squared his shoulders"
- to find a square equal in area to: "square a circle"
- to regulate or adjust to some standard or principle: "square our actions"
- to mark off into squares
- to set right, bring into agreement: "squared their goals with their beliefs"
- to agree precisely: "your actions should square with your words"
- to settle matters: "square the bill"
- to regulate according to any given standard (1530s)

Finally, as an adverb, the word is used as follows:

- in a straightforward or honest manner
- to face or be face-to-face
- at right angles
- with nothing intervening: "ran square into it"
- in a firm manner: "looked her square in the eye"
- in a fair open manner, honestly

This last adverb seems to be of rule, regularity, exact proportion, hence integrity of conduct, honest dealing. It is attested from 1630s as "directly, in line." The sense of "completely" is colloquial American English (1862).

Used as an idiom, the word has meant the following:

—To refer to the natural, even gait of a good horse in such expressions as a "square-gaited" horse or a "square trotter." (1832)

—By 1836, "full or complete," as a "square meal," though people didn't talk about "three squares a day" until 1882.

—As early as 1804, "square" had come to mean fair, honest, as in "square fight," with "square talk" coming in 1860.

—"Square deal" appeared as a card player's term in the 1880s, and "square shooter" in 1920. However, it was Theodore Roosevelt who popularized the term "square deal" in its general sense.

So, are we all square now?

BACK TO SQUARE ONE

"Square one" means the initial stage or starting point. Going "back to square one" means to start all over again.

It's logical to assume the expression arose from a board game or street game where an unlucky throw of dice sends the player back to the beginning of the course. There were many board games, popular in the 1800s and early 1900s, with numbered squares similar to *Snakes & Ladders*, where a player landing on a square carrying a penalty might have to go "back to square one."

However, according to one etymologist, it came from hopscotch. This playground game is played on a grid of numbered squares. The precise rules of the game vary from place to place but it usually involves players hopping from square to square, skipping over the square containing their thrown stone. They usually go from one to eight or ten and then back to square one.

It's like turning off the alarm clock and going back to sleep.

FAIR AND SQUARE

"Fair and square" means honest, impartial, correct, above board, even-handed. When a team wins a game, and they'd followed all the rules, they won fair and square. It's also used in business circles to add emphasis that everything is legal, legitimate, and above board.

The earliest known use of the phrase was in an essay written by Francis Bacon called *Of Prophecies*, written in 1604.

The idea of "fair and square" most likely comes from the basic idea of a square, which is a symbol of fairness and impartiality because it has four equal sides. In many games, playing fields are square in shape, and board games are often marked in squares.

"Fair" and "square" mean the same thing, so the idiom is a "tautology," but it has probably survived, as have many such idioms, due to its rhyme. The human ear seems to love rhymes.

SQUARE DEAL

A "square deal" means an honest and fair transaction or arrangement, similar to "fair and square," but "square deal" did not originate until the late 1800s, in America.

The press was using the term "square deal" as early as 1871. In 1890, the phrase started to appear in headlines. For example, "Give China a Square Deal."

President Theodore Roosevelt used the term to reflect his three major goals: conservation of natural resources, control of corporations, and consumer protection. His ideas were outlined in a volume entitled *A Square Deal*, published in 1906 during his second term. It was the first of three "deals" offered by reform-minded presidents in the 1900s, the other two being Franklin D. Roosevelt's New Deal and Harry S. Truman's Fair Deal.

SQUARE ONE'S SHOULDERS

To "square one's shoulders" is to prepare to deal with a hard task or to demonstrate courage and resolve. The phrase dates to the early 1800s.

The implication is that you stand straight, pull your shoulders up and back,

and look determined to wade in and take care of business.

DESSERT SQUARES

"Dessert squares" are a type of American "bar cookie" that has the texture of a firm cake but softer than the usual cookie.

This dessert is prepared in a pan and then baked in the oven. It's cut into squares or rectangles and is a staple of bake sales. Popular flavors include peanut butter, lemon, chocolate coconut, pineapple, apple, almond, toffee, chocolate cheesecake, and the "famous" seven-layer bar.

The Nanaimo bar is a deliciously tempting treat made with chocolate, honey sweetened graham crackers, crunchy nuts, rich butter, and custard powder. The bar doesn't require baking. It's named after the city of Nanaimo, British Columbia.

I have to stop now; I'm getting hungry.

SQUARE MILE

The square mile is an imperial and US unit of measure for area. One square mile is an area equal to the area of a square with sides that are each one mile in length.

In case you're interested, that's 4,014,489,600 square inches.

SQUARE PEG IN A ROUND HOLE

If you describe someone as a "square peg in a round hole," you mean that they are in a situation that does not suit them at all. The phrase can also mean a person who doesn't fit into society's norms, a misfit.

The metaphor was originated by Sydney Smith in *On the Conduct of the Understanding*, a lecture on moral philosophy that he delivered at the Royal Institution circa 1805.

The British novelist, Edward Bulwer-Lytton, used it in a late 19th-century book, "The farmer responded, 'I don't see why my son has any right to fancy himself a square peg, when his father, and his grandfather, and his great-grandfather, have been round pegs; and it is agin' nature for any creature not to take after its own kind.'"

Trivia: Dutch settlers in northeastern North America sometimes actually pounded square-cut pegs into round holes when building in the 1800s.

SQUARE PIANO

Yes, Virginia, there is a musical instrument called a "square piano," but it's rectangular, not square. It was popular for music-making from the time of its invention in the mid-1700s to about 1860 in Europe and to about 1880 in the US.

The later square grand pianos also enjoyed great popularity through the mid- and late-1800s. They were gradually replaced by upright pianos, which had a smaller footprint and larger sound.

A square piano consists of a rectangular case mounted on four legs with a keyboard of between five and five and one-half octaves, shorter than today's piano of seven and a quarter octaves. Square pianos provided the player with opportunities to vary the sound by using a variety of pedals and hand operated "stops" which could make the strings vibrate longer or produce a more muted sound.

Advances in technology and materials enabled piano makers to further develop pianos in the 1800s, and square pianos were gradually superseded. Fortunately, examples of early square pianos have survived, which allows us to hear music composed for them as it was intended to be heard.

SQUARE-RIGGER

A "square-rigger" is a square-rigged craft. Square-rig is the simplest form of rigging and the most ancient.

Square-rig refers to a type of sail and rigging where square sails are mounted on horizontal spars. The number of masts, and sails, and how the spars (yards) are set out, distinguishes a square-rigged ship.

The oldest archaeological evidence of a square-rig on a vessel is an image on a clay disk from Mesopotamia from 5000 BCE. Single sail square rigs were used by the ancient Egyptians, Phoenicians, Greeks, Romans, and Celts. Later the Scandinavians, the Germanic peoples, and the Slavs adopted the single square-rigged sail, with it becoming one of the defining characteristics of the classic "Viking" ships.

FOUR-SQUARE

"Four-square" dates from circa 1300. Literally, it means having four equal sides.

If used to describe a building, it means having a square shape and a solid appearance. For example, "a castle standing four-square and isolated on a peninsula."

If used to describe a person, it means steady, blunt, honest, or direct, marked by boldness and conviction. To stand four-square behind someone means they have your full support.

Lastly, the term refers to a children's game circa 1955.

SQUARE UP

To "square up" means

- to take a fighter's stance
- settle or pay an account
- to face and deal with a problem, person, or situation
- to tidy up (Scottish)

The fighting sense of the term "square up" comes from the sport of boxing. Boxers can assume either an angled stance, a defensive advantage because it gives the opponent less area to hit, or a more head-on squared stance, which allows for more power behind offensive hits.

By the late 1700s, to square up meant to challenge an opponent in any arena, including metaphorical ones outside the ring.

Squaring up as in reconciling objects, people, or ideas takes its inspiration from carpentry, where a carpenter uses a carpentry square to ensure his structure is square.

SQUARE AWAY

"Square away" is closely related to "square up." It means to arrange or deal with something in a satisfactory way, to complete all necessary arrangements. For example, "I've got my tickets and hotel squared away."

The term also means:

- to square the yards to sail before the wind
- to take up a fighting stance
- to rectify a situation or make everything ship-shape

"Accordingly, when the wheel was relieved at eight o'clock, the order was given to keep her due north, and all hands were turned up to square away the yards and make sail."

If I spent a little more time weeding the garden, I could say that I had it

squared away.

ON THE SQUARE

"On the square" means honest and straightforward, on the up and up.

The square represents fairness, balance, and firmness which is reflected in phrases such as "on the square" and "squared away." Something that is squared is something that is stable, a foundation upon which to build.

Both expressions were taken from the ritual of Freemasonry, and both are of legendary antiquity. In the rites of the lodges, the carpenter's level is a symbol of equality. The square is a symbol of morality, truth, and honesty.

SQUARE THE BOOKS

To "square the books" means that you make sure you've paid all the money you owe, and that you've received all the money other people owe you.

SQUARE THE CIRCLE

My dictionary says that to "square the circle" means to construct a square equal in area to a given circle (a problem incapable of a purely geometric solution). Figuratively, it means to do something considered to be impossible.

Squaring the circle is a problem in geometry first proposed in Greek mathematics. It is the challenge of constructing a square with the area of a given circle by using only a finite number of steps with a compass and straightedge.

In 1882, the task was proven to be impossible.

Despite the proof that it is impossible, attempts to square the circle have been common in pseudomathematics (the work of mathematical cranks). The expression "squaring the circle" is sometimes used as a metaphor for trying to do the impossible.

SQUARE BRACKETS

"Square brackets" are used in books and articles, to set off words that make a quotation clearer or that comment on it, although they were not in the original text. For example, from a review, "The novel is at its strongest when describing the dignity of Cambridge [a slave] and the education of Emily [the daughter of an absentee landlord]."

Square brackets are a set of punctuation marks that resemble and are used similarly to parentheses, but the two are not used interchangeably. Most of the time, square brackets are used to alter or provide additional context to quotes.

All style guides, grammar resources, and ethical guidelines will tell you that it is not acceptable to change the wording of a quote so as to change its meaning or attribute words to a person that they never said.

However, sometimes it is necessary to adjust a quote or provide additional context to it to help a reader understand what is being said. Square brackets allow you to do this while making it clear that whatever is in the square brackets was not part of the original text or statement.

When it comes to quotes, there are several different reasons to use square brackets:

- clarification
- adding more information
- adjusting a quote for grammatical reasons
- noting a grammar error that was in an original quote
- parentheses within parentheses

OUT OF SQUARE

"Out of square" means something does not have exact right angles. By extension, it can mean not in agreement or alignment, faulty, or not in proper order.

My house is out of square, in both senses.

SQUARESVILLE

If something is "squaresville," it's conventional, unfashionable, or conservative. It sounds like a Roaring Twenties word but was not seen in print until 1951.

SQUARE DANCE

A "square dance" is a dance for four couples arranged in a square, with one couple on each side, facing the middle of the square. Square dances are also known as country dances, traditional dances, folk dances, barn dances, ceilidh dances, contra dances, Playford dances, etc. These dances were documented in the 1600s in England, but probably began long before that. The phrase was first seen in print by 1831.

Square dancing is done in many different styles all around the world and is strongly associated with the US, where 31 states have designated it as their official state dance. The modern western square dance is widely known and performed worldwide.

In most American forms of square dance, the dancers are prompted through a sequence of steps by a caller to the beat of the music. In other variations, dancers have no caller and instead memorize and perform a specific routine and sequence of steps. Square dance music varies widely, from traditional tunes to modern types.

Some forms possess a specific dress code and others have no requirements. The standard square formation can also vary to include more or fewer dancers or deviate so that dancers form up in a different shape to the standard square.

One of the early influences may have been the Morris dance, an English dance for six men involving a line formation and energetic steps. This dance is closely related to the English country dance, which included a variety of dances for groups of couples arranged in circles, lines, or squares. In 1651, John Playford published 105 of these dances in *The English Dancing Master*, eight of which are square dances still in use.

Most importantly, square dancers always look as if they're having fun.

SQUARE WHEEL

A "square wheel" is a wheel that, instead of being circular, has the shape of a square. While literal square wheels exist, the more common use of the idiom is figurative and means very bad or naive engineering. The figurative use is first seen in print by 1920.

A type of square-wheeled vehicle was invented in 2006 by Jason Winckler of Global Composites, Inc. in the US. The prototype appears ungainly, but the inventor proposes that the system may be useful in microscopic-sized machines.

All I can say is, good luck with that.

ALL SQUARE

Being "all square" means being clear of all debts or obligations. It can also mean (of contestants or teams in sports) having equal scores.

So, in other words, if two people are all square, neither of them owes the other anything. If two teams are all square, they have an equal number of goals or points. They're tied.

This phrase can be used for nearly any business or personal relationship between parties, whether it's between individuals or groups. It has also come to be a substitute for saying "Okay!"

So, we're all square, aren't we? I've written; you've read.



UP THE CREEK

UP THE CREEK WITHOUT A PADDLE

Being "up the creek without a paddle" means you're in a difficult situation, with no way of getting out of it. In either case, you're in trouble, in a serious predicament. For example, "If the check doesn't arrive today, I'm up a creek."

A similar phrase, "up the river," refers primarily to being sent to prison or jail, but also to being in a challenging or perilous situation. It was first used in 1891, in the context of being sent to Sing Sing prison located up the Hudson River from New York City.

The idiom "up the creek without a paddle" conjures up the image of a stranded canoeist with no way of moving (paddling) the canoe. This expression originated in America in the 1860s as "up shit creek" or "up the creek." The "without a paddle" part was added only in the mid 1900s.

The phrase appeared in the transcript of the 1868 Annual report of the US Secretary of War, in a section that included reports from districts of South Carolina: "Our men have put old [Abraham] Lincoln up shit creek."

Of course, "shit creek" wasn't a real place, just a figurative way of describing an unpleasant location where you wouldn't want to be.

It has been suggested that the phrase arose from English history. In the early days of Haslar Royal Naval Hospital, in England, patients had to be transferred to the hospital by boat from the harbor up Haslar Creek. Many patients who went there did not survive, and therefore the phrase "up the creek" may have originated from sailors who knew that if you were rowed to Haslar you were in trouble. However, neither form of the phrase can be found in British sources of the 1800s, not even in verbatim transcripts such as those of trials at the Old Bailey in London.

Some writers have suggested that "up the creek" might be from the older "to be up Salt River," which sometimes appeared as "up Salt Creek." From the 1820s this was a way to mock the inhabitants of the backwoods of the US for their uncouth manners and uncultivated speech.

But I'll bet those backwoods people knew how to paddle a canoe.

IN A PICKLE

Being "in a pickle" doesn't mean you're in a jar of relish; it means finding yourself in a problematic or tricky situation which may be difficult to escape.

The earliest pickles were spicy sauces made to accompany meat dishes. Later, in the 1500s, the name pickle was also given to a mixture of spiced, salted vinegar that was used as a preservative. Later still, in the 1600s, the vegetables that were preserved, such as cucumbers and gherkins, also came to be called pickles.

The "in trouble" meaning of "in a pickle" alluded to being as disoriented and mixed up as the stewed vegetables that made up pickles. *The Oxford English Dictionary* has the earliest-known written instance of this phrase as from 1562.

During this period, it was also colloquially linked to the idea of being heavily intoxicated. Since you can preserve things in alcohol, it's not a far leap from one to the other. However, these days, we only say that you're "pickled" if you're drunk.

Shakespeare used the phrase in his play, *The Tempest*, with the line, "How cam'st thou in a pickle?" Some people assume that Shakespeare originated the phrase, since he's the source of so many phrases we still use, but this one was familiar before he wrote his plays.

I think being in a jam would be sweeter than being in a pickle.

MAY YOU LIVE IN INTERESTING TIMES

While purporting to be a blessing, the phrase "may you live in interesting times" is in fact a curse. It is always used ironically, with the clear implication that the "uninteresting times" of peace and tranquility are more life-enhancing than "interesting" ones.

Despite the phrase being so common in English as to be known as the "Chinese curse," the saying is apocryphal, and there is no known equivalent expression in Chinese. The nearest related Chinese expression translates as, "Better to be a dog in times of tranquility than a human in times of chaos."

The phrase was introduced in the 20th century in the form "interesting age" rather than "interesting times" and appears that way in the opening remarks made by Frederic R. Coudert at the Proceedings of the Academy of Political Science in 1939.

As to the "interesting times" version, it appears only after WWII. No one is

sure who introduced the term but the person who did most to bring it to the public's attention was Robert F. Kennedy. In a speech in Cape Town in June 1966, Kennedy said: "There is a Chinese curse which says, 'May he live in interesting times.' Like it or not we live in interesting times. They are times of danger and uncertainty; but they are also more open to the creative energy of men than any other time in history."

As one who lived through the 1960s, I can say that they were nothing if not interesting.

ON THE HOOK

If you're "on the hook," you owe money, or you are caught in a bad situation.

Once a fish is on the hook, it's in big trouble — it's about to become dinner. Anytime you're on the hook, you should try to wriggle free, especially if it's just a matter of paying up.

OFF THE HOOK

Being "off the hook" means you're free of a difficult situation, let off from blame or trouble, and no longer forced to deal with unpleasant circumstances. "My work assignment for tonight got canceled, so I'm off the hook." It's often used to refer to someone who was caught doing something illegal or wrong but managed to escape being punished.

Second, it can mean that a telephone receiver is not positioned on the cradle, resulting in a busy signal and the inability to receive calls.

And, finally, it's slang for something very enjoyable, exciting, or "cool." This meaning originated in American rap music and culture.

The origin of the idiom "off the hook" can be found in fishing. A fish on the hook is caught and has no options; it's trapped unless it is released. Just like a fish off the hook, a human off the hook has been released from obligations or commitments.

SUCK HIND TIT

To "suck hind tit" means not getting a fair share. More specifically:

- of an animal in a litter, to get the least amount of milk from the mother
- to be last or nearly last in line
- to receive the smallest, least valuable, or least wanted portion of something

The saying is derived from the behavior of barnyard pigs. The runt, or weakest piglet, is forced by its stronger siblings to nurse on the tit farthest back on the mother pig, which gives the least nourishment. But the situation occurs with any female mammal that gives birth to litters, including dogs and cats.

The phrase originated in America in the early 1900s, from the allusion to the runt in a litter. The modern American expression "that sucks!" meaning it's sub-standard or bad, derives from the same source, but dates from late 60's.

CAUGHT BETWEEN SCYLLA AND CHARYBDIS

To be "caught between Scylla and Charybdis" means being caught between a rock and a hard place, or two equally unattractive or risky options. It's a predicament in which avoidance of either of the two dangers means exposure to the other. Simpler and easier to spell alternatives are "between the devil and the deep blue sea," "on the horns of a dilemma," and "out of the frying pan into the fire."

In Greek mythology, the hero Odysseus was sailing home from the Trojan War through the Strait of Messina (which separates the island of Sicily from Calabria, on the Italian mainland) where he was threatened by two monsters, one on either side. Scylla was a giant with six heads, each having three rows of shark-like teeth, who devoured whatever came her way. (It was the personification of a reef.) Charybdis was a whirlpool on the opposite shore that sucked in ships that sailed near her. Avoiding one danger meant coming too close to the other.

Odysseus had to figure out which was the lesser of the two evils because he had to pass through this strait to reach home. He chose to sail closer to Scylla since he risked losing only a few men as opposed to losing the whole ship if he went closer to Charybdis.

Over the centuries, the story has often been applied to various situations, many of them political. A major example was the problem of steering the British ship of state between the North and South in the American Civil War.

A French poet, Barthélemy Aneau, gave an allegorical interpretation in his book *Picta Poesis* (1552). There he advised that the risk (Scylla) of being envied for wealth or reputation is preferable to being swallowed by the Charybdis of poverty: "Choose the lesser of these evils. A wise man would rather be envied than miserable."

The idiom has since taken on new life in pop lyrics. In The Police's 1983 single *Wrapped Around Your Finger*, the second line uses it as a metaphor

for being in a dangerous relationship. The American heavy metal band Trivium also referenced this idiom in *Torn Between Scylla and Charybdis*, a track from their 2008 album *Shogun*, in which the lyrics are about having to choose "between death and doom."

Tough choice!

THE WRITING IS ON THE WALL

If you say, "the writing is on the wall," you're saying there are clear signs that something bad is going to happen. Doom or misfortune is about to occur.

For example, if two people are discussing the layoffs occurring in their company and one says to the other, "The writing is on the wall for us," she means their jobs are likely to be eliminated, too.

The source of this phrase is the Christian Bible. In the Book of Daniel, chapter 5, King Belshazzar of Babylon, and his court were indulging in a drunken revelry and debasing sacred temple vessels by using them as wine goblets when a disembodied hand wrote "*mene mene tekel upharsin*" on the palace wall. Terrified, the king brought in the prophet Daniel to interpret what they meant.

Daniel made it clear that the phrase was an elaborate wordplay. He interpreted it to mean that God is angry at Belshazzar for worshipping false idols rather than God. As punishment, his kingdom will be taken away from him and divided. That night the king is murdered, and his lands are taken over by an invading tribe.

That's about as gloomy and doomy as it gets.



WORDS WORDS WORDS

Aren't they wonderful? And there are so *many* of them! Do not be afraid; we will not get into conjugating verbs or any of the other rules of grammar. We're here to have fun.

WORD MANGLING

When speaking, we all accidentally mangle words from time to time. As a teenager, I once said "hyptonize" instead of "hypnotize" and I thought that was pretty clever, so I went on using the mangled version. What I was doing, by the way, is called "metathesis." Then, one day, I grew up and decided I wasn't so smart after all, and it took a few years to train my tongue to use the correct version of the word. That experience made me think about all the different ways language can be mangled and realize that such mangling can sometimes change words permanently.

Mangling words deliberately can be a lot of fun though and, when done by experts, might more accurately be called word wrangling.

There are six kinds of word mangling/wrangling. In brief:

- spoonerism (transposing the initial sounds or letters of two or more words)
- metathesis (transposing letters or sounds in one word)
- malapropism (using an incorrect word in place of a word with a similar sound)
- neologism (a new or relatively recent word or phrase)
- eggcorn (written versions of a plausible mishearing of a phrase or word)
- mondegreen (mishearing words or phrases in song lyrics or poetry)

Following are more details and some examples of each type of mangling.

SPOONERISM

This type of mangling was named after the Reverend Spooner (1844–1930), Warden of New College, Oxford, who was notoriously prone to it. The Reverend suffered from dysgraphia, a form of dyslexia that is described in the Oxford English Dictionary as "a disturbance of the clear distinction of the sounds of words, confusion between closely related phonemes."

That sounds pretty serious, but I find the results amusing:

- poobarb rye (rhubarb pie)
- plaster man (master plan)
- fart smeller (smart feller)
- chipping the flannel (flipping the channel)

- bunny phone (funny bone)
- chewing the doors (doing the chores)
- crawls through the fax (falls through the cracks)
- my zips are lipped (my lips are zipped)
- belly jeans (jellybeans)
- roaring with pain (pouring with rain)
- chilled greese (grilled cheese)
- teepy slime (sleepy time)

And, finally, George Carlin's contribution: "don't pet the sweaty things."

METATHESIS

The dictionary definition of metathesis (first known use circa 1538 CE) is "a change of place or condition," such as:

1. transposition of two phonemes in a word
2. a chemical reaction in which different kinds of molecules exchange parts to form other kinds of molecules

So, in linguistics, it means the transposition (flipping or reversal) of letters or sounds within a word, to form new words with different pronunciations and meanings. (Or, if you're a teenager, just because you can.) One example is the English word *thrill*, which was *thyrlian* in Old English and *thirlen* in Middle English. By the late 1500s, native English speakers had switched the placement of the 'r' to form *thrill*. Other examples are the alteration of *curd* into *crud* and *bryd* to *bird*.

Then there's the word 'ask.' The original word is an Old English verb, called 'áscian.' Over time, the verb underwent metathesis to form 'ask,' now frequently mispronounced as 'aks.' Also, the word 'foliage' was originally from a Latin root *folium*, meaning leaf. Undergoing metathesis, the word later changed to 'foillage,' and thence to 'foliage.'

In many cases, metathesis used to be, and sometimes still is, considered as a slip of tongue. For instance, 'asterisk' is sometimes pronounced as 'asteriks,' and 'cavalry' is often pronounced 'calvary.' Then there's that miserable word, 'anemone,' which I simply can't remember how to say, and it's inclined to come out of my mouth as 'anenome.'

Back in classical Greece in the first century BCE, Dionysius of Halicarnassus, a historian and scholar in rhetoric, analysed classical texts and applied revisions to make them sound more eloquent. He was using metathesis, which may sound impressive, but today we'd simply call him an editor.

Here are more examples:

- nuclear becomes 'nucular'

- prescription becomes 'perscription'
- pretty becomes 'purty'
- relevant becomes 'revelant'
- introduce becomes 'interduce'

It strikes me, looking at the examples, that metathesis may often happen because it makes the word easier to say.

MALAPROPISM

A malapropism is the use of an incorrect word in place of a word with a similar sound, often resulting in a nonsensical or humorous utterance. An example: "I am not under the affluence (influence) of alcohol."

The term comes from a character named Mrs. Malaprop in Richard Sheridan's 1775 play *The Rivals*. Mrs. Malaprop frequently uses words which don't have the meaning that she intends but which sound similar to words that do. Sheridan may have chosen her name in humorous reference to the word 'malapropos,' meaning 'inappropriate,' derived from the French phrase *mal à propos* (literally 'poorly placed').

Modern writers often use malapropisms to convey that a speaker or character is flustered, bothered, unaware, or confused. Stan Laurel, for example, in *Sons of The Desert*, says that Oliver Hardy is suffering a nervous 'shakedown' (breakdown), and calls the Exalted Ruler of their group the 'exhausted ruler.'

Examples:

- Alice said she couldn't eat crabs or any other crushed Asians. (crustaceans)
- Good punctuation means not to be late. (punctuality)
- Having one wife is called monotony. (monogamy)
- The flood damage was so bad they had to evaporate the city. (evacuate)
- Tom is the very pineapple of politeness. (pinnacle)
- Flying saucers are just an optical conclusion. (illusion)

And some examples of malapropisms made by well-known people:

- He was a man of great statue. - (stature) - Thomas Menino, mayor of Boston
- Texas has a lot of electrical votes. (electoral votes) - Yogi Berra
- Well, that was a cliff-dweller. (cliff-hanger) - Wes Westrum
- Be sure and put some of those neutrons on it. (croutons) - Mike Smith
- Create a little dysentery among the ranks. (dissension) - Christopher Moltisanti from *The Sopranos*

Yogi Berra also said, "When you come to a fork in the road, take it."

Okay, I will. I will ride off in all directions.

NEOLOGISM

A "neologism" (first used 1772) is a relatively recent word or phrase that may become commonly used. Neologisms are usually introduced when the existing vocabulary is insufficient to describe something new. Or something old, for that matter. Or accidentally. Or simply because it's fun to make up new words.

New words come from creativity and invention, merging of existing words, and borrowing from other cultures and languages. The life span of a neologism is limited because the neologism will either be formally accepted into mainstream language (at which point, it ceases to be a neologism), or it will fade into obscurity due to lack of use.

A neologism may enter the language from a popular novel. Examples are "grok" from *Stranger in a Strange Land* by Robert A. Heinlein, and "cyberspace" from *Neuromancer* by William Gibson. Famous names are another source, for example "quixotic" (referring to the title character in *Don Quixote de La Mancha* by Cervantes). The terms "coke" or "cola" may be used in reference to any beverage like Coca-Cola, regardless of brand. "Kleenex" is used in reference to any facial tissue. "Xerox" is now a verb meaning "to copy."

Transferred words encompass words taken from another language and used in an adjusted form in English.

- herbs from French *herbes* meaning herbs
- alligator from Spanish *el lagarto* meaning lizard
- wiener dog from German *wiener* meaning hot dog

Onomatopoeias are words that sound like the sound they describe. Sometimes onomatopoeias are invented for specific sounds. Here are examples:

- boom (an explosion)
- cock-a-doodle-doo (a rooster's call)
- honk (a car horn)

Here are a few examples of blend words:

- smoke + fog = smog
- spoon + fork = spork
- breakfast + lunch = brunch

And a few words which were neologisms but are now part of our language:

- butterfingers (Charles Dickens)
- pedestrian (William Wordsworth had to invent a name for a person walking)

- gremlin (Roald Dahl)
- factoid (Norman Mailer, to mean a doubtful fact presented in the press without any extra proofs. People usually accept it as true, but unfortunately, it's not true.)

Examples of neologisms in popular culture:

- BFF (best friends forever)
- chillax (calm down or relax)
- staycation (vacation at home)
- troll (someone who posts rude and obnoxious comments online)
- tumbleweed (any fall suffered because of smoking too much cannabis)

And, finally, examples of my all-time favorites, words created for competitions. Some asked for alternative meanings to existing words. Others asked contestants to take any word from the dictionary, alter it by adding, subtracting, or changing just one letter and supplying a new definition.

- flabbergasted (appalled over how much weight you have gained)
- pokemon (a Rastafarian proctologist)
- intaxication (euphoria at getting a tax refund, which lasts until you realize it was your money to start with)
- willy-nilly (impotent)
- nonversation (a pointless chat)
- onionate (to overwhelm with post-dining breath)
- vidiot (person inept at programming video recording equipment)
- beditation (the time between waking up and getting up where you just lie there and think)

EGGCORN

Once described as a "slip of the ear," and similar to the pun, an eggcorn is the written version of a plausible mishearing of a phrase or word. The new phrase introduces a meaning that is different from the original, but plausible in the same context, such as "old-timers" disease" for "Alzheimer's disease."

"Eggcorn" was coined by professor of linguistics Geoffrey Pullum in September 2003. A woman had substituted the word "eggcorn" for "acorn," and Pullum suggested using "eggcorn" itself as a label for this type of error.

That seems sensible. Acorns are shaped like eggs. And acorns are the seeds of trees just as eggs are the seeds of chickens—seeds that spring into new life.

Eggcorns are incorrect but may be more satisfying than the correct expression. Examples:

- mixmatches instead of mismatches

- ex-patriot (expatriate)
- mating name (maiden name)
- porkulent (corpulent)
- butt naked (buck naked)
- wonderlust (wanderlust)
- flaw in the ointment (fly in the ointment)

The Oxford English Dictionary added "eggcorn" to their list of words in 2010.

MONDEGREEN:

The mondegreen is a cousin of the "eggcorn," but refers only to a misheard lyric and also changes the meaning. The mondegreen came from someone who heard the last line from the Scottish folk song *The Bonny Earl O'Morray* as, "They have slain Earl O'Morray/and Lady Mondegreen" instead of, "They have slain Earl O'Morray/and laid him on the green."

Other examples:

- *Bad Moon Rising* - (Creedence Clearwater Revival) people sometimes mishear the line "there's a bad moon rising" as stating "there's a bathroom on the right."
- *Blinded by the Light* - (Manfred Mann's Earth Band) the line "revved up like a deuce" is often misheard as "wrapped up like a douche."
- *Purple Haze* - (Jimi Hendrix) the line "excuse me while I kiss the sky," is sometimes interpreted as "excuse me while I kiss this guy."

So, there are all the ways of mangling words, until a talented word wrangler comes up with another one.

WORDS ALIKE

Much about the English language can be described as tricky. For example, the many words that sound the same but are spelled differently. And the words which are spelled the same way but have a different pronunciation.

There are, of course, names for these words that are the same, but different.

These two-word names are created with the combining form *homo-*, meaning "one and the same; similar; alike," and each has an additional root that sheds more light on the word's meaning. *Homophone* comes from the Greek *-phōnos* (meaning "sounding"); *homograph* is from the Greek *graphein* ("to write" and, by extension, "to spell").

There's a third word, *homonym*, from the Greek *onyma* (meaning "name"), but it can be either a homophone or a homograph or even both. Which means that all homophones and homographs are homonyms, so we don't

need to go there.

HOMOPHONES: words that *sound* the same but are different in meaning or spelling. These words may be spelled differently from each other (to, too, and two), or may be spelled the same way (quail meaning "to cower" and quail meaning "a type of bird"). Examples:

- there / their / they're (bugbears for most people)
- ad (advertisement) / add (increase)
- ate (past tense of eat) / eight (number 8)
- hour / our
- flower / flour

Here's an example containing four words that sound the same but differ in meaning and spelling:

- For: on behalf of, because, purpose, in favor of, etc.
- Four: the number 4
- Foor: strong odor, a ford over a river, dialectical variant of furrow
- Fore: placed in front, an interjection used by a golfer to warn of a flying golf ball
- Fofooor: is not a word recognized by the OED (or me), but simply a keen golfer mispronouncing "fore," hoping his ball won't hit anybody.

HOMOGRAPHS: words that are *spelled* the same, but differ in meaning or pronunciation. Sometimes these words sound different (the bow of a ship, the bow that shoots arrows), and sometimes they sound the same (bear meaning 'the animal' and bear meaning 'to carry'). Here are some examples:

- wind (a gust of air) / wind (to follow a crooked course)
- lead (to go in front of) / lead (a metal) / led (past tense of lead)
- bass (low, deep sound) / bass (a type of fish)
- bat (animal) / bat (sports equipment)
- pen (a writing implement) / pen (an animal enclosure)
- read (to peruse a book) / read (past tense of 'to read')

All this makes me have a lot of sympathy with people whose first language is not English.

WORDY

Being "wordy" means that you use too many words, more than necessary to express your thoughts. Perhaps you are talkative or, as J. I. Rodale's *The Synonym Finder* suggests, long-tongued, windy. People may comment that you have the gift of the gab.

But wordy speech suggests repetitiveness, dullness, obscurity, or lack of precision. It can seem like so many shaggy-dog stories. Being wordy is a common human affliction, though; the word has been around since before the 12th century.

One way of being wordy is to use expressions which say the same thing twice. For example, 'close proximity' is redundant because proximity by itself means closeness.

Redundant expressions are everywhere:

- red in color (what else would red be?)
- forward planning (you can't plan backwards)
- free gift (blame the advertising guys for this one)
- sad lament (it can't be glad, can it?)
- true fact (facts are always true)
- end result (can there be a result in the beginning?)
- past history (it sure ain't in the future!)
- unexpected surprise (I never saw that one coming!)
- famous celebrity (so long as he isn't infamous)
- wealthy millionaire (are there any poor millionaires?)
- advance forward (advancing backwards would be a retreat)
- retreat back (would that mean retreating twice as fast?)
- raise up (because you can't raise down)

Intensifiers are words intended to add force to what you say: very, absolutely, positively, really, quite, and so on. Sometimes these words don't add a thing. An example:

"Roosevelt, certainly a quite active president, refused to give in to his handicap."

More direct: "Roosevelt, an active president, refused to give in to his handicap."

Another way to be wordy is to overuse "there is," "there are," and "it is." You might say, "There is a famous author who lives on my block." But, the shorter and more direct sentence would be, "A famous author lives on my block."

Other examples of wordy expressions with the direct expressions in brackets:

- after the conclusion of (after)
- at the present moment, at this point in time (now)
- by means of (by)
- owing to the fact that (because)
- a man who is (he is)
- in a place where (where)
- in connection with (about)
- in order to (to)
- in spite of the fact that (although or though)
- in the near future (soon)
- on the part of (by)

—with the exception of (except)

The internet tells me that there is a word game called *A Little Wordy*. I didn't go there; I'm drowning in words as it is.

The ram on the cover of this book may be wordy, but I hope that he's simply a walking dictionary and that all his words are clear and to the point.

DOUBLESPEAK

Doublespeak intentionally distorts, disguises, obscures, or reverses the meaning of words, to deceive or confuse. It's a deliberate attempt to make some seriously bad information look or sound good. The word is a neologism based on the compounds Newspeak and Doublethink in George Orwell's novel *1984*, published in 1949.

"Double-talk" sounds like a synonym for doublespeak, but it has a slightly different slant. Double-talk means speech that is difficult or impossible to understand, usually a mix of purposefully unintelligible phrases and random, nonsense syllables. Double-talk can be used for humorous effect, often to mimic a foreign language. It predates Orwell's book, and I can remember my parents, long ago, talking about a neighbor who spouted "double-talk," or "double Dutch."

We use and hear doublespeak all the time, in the form of euphemisms, workplace and political jargon, and gobbledygook. Information reported in the news or shared via social media often uses the inflated language of yellow journalism. Since doublespeak is a human tactic, it's complex, multifaceted, and is meant, for example, to hide the truth, to make money, to hide negativity, and to be politically correct.

For example, if someone uses the term "gently used" when selling an older car, are they being honest? Or are they trying to hide the facts that the car is prone to overheating and stalling, and has faulty wiring and a bad engine? If a pharmaceutical company says, "There are some minor side effects," when the drug is known to cause heart attacks, they're using doublespeak.

As William Lutz says in *Doubts about Doublespeak* (State Government News, July 1993), "Doublespeak is language which pretends to communicate but doesn't. It is language which makes the bad seem good, the negative seem positive, the unpleasant seem unattractive, or at least tolerable. It is language which avoids, shifts, or denies responsibility; language which is at variance with its real or purported meaning. It is language which conceals or prevents thought."

Doublespeak may also take the form of unsupported generalizations, or deliberate ambiguity. Not surprisingly, politics and government provide a perfect canvas for doublespeak, with politicians—even presidents and prime ministers—using the practice to prevaricate and obfuscate their real meaning. It is also a tool used in the advertising industry.

"Political language...is designed to make lies sound truthful and murder respectable, and to give an appearance of solidity to pure wind." (George Orwell, *"Politics and the English Language,"* 1946)

The writer Edward S. Herman said, "What is really important in the world of doublespeak is the ability to lie, whether knowingly or unconsciously, and to get away with it; and the ability to use lies and choose and shape facts selectively, blocking out those that don't fit an agenda or program." As Orwell notes, one may tell deliberate lies while genuinely believing them. One may even forget all the inconvenient facts.

The US National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) has, since 1974, been issuing The Doublespeak Award, an "ironic tribute to public speakers who have perpetuated language that is grossly deceptive, evasive, euphemistic, confusing, or self-centered." Those who receive the award are usually politicians, or government departments. The US Department of Defense won the award three times, for using euphemisms like "servicing the target" (bombing) and "force packages" (warplanes). Among the other phrases in contention was "meaningful downturn in aggregate output," an attempt to avoid saying "recession."

Edward S. Herman and Noam Chomsky comment in their book *Manufacturing Consent: the Political Economy of the Mass Media*, "For example, the use of state funds by the poor and financially needy is commonly referred to as 'social welfare' or 'handouts,' which the 'coddled' poor 'take advantage of.' These terms, however, are not as often applied to other beneficiaries of government spending such as military spending."

Doublespeak is rife during wars. For example, a US Air Force press officer called bombing raids in Southeast Asia "air support." The US State Department used "unlawful or arbitrary deprivation of life" as a euphemism for "killing." In April 2003, President George W. Bush said, "I reminded [the soldiers] and their families that the war in Iraq is really about peace."

Fighting for peace is like fucking for virginity, right?

But some politicians have fun with the concept. In December 1947, President Harry S. Truman said, "I have appointed a Secretary of Semantics—a most important post. He is to furnish me with forty-to-fifty-dollar words. Tell me how to say yes and no in the same sentence without a contradiction.

He is to tell me the combination of words that will put me against inflation in San Francisco and for it in New York. He is to show me how to keep silent—and say everything. You can very well see how he can save me an immense amount of worry." (*Quoted by Paul Dickson in Words from the White House. Walker & Company, 2013*)

Doublespeak is also used as a device in satirical comedy and social commentary to ironically parody political or bureaucratic establishments' intent on obfuscation or prevarication. The television series *Yes Minister* is notable for its use of this device. Oscar Wilde was an early proponent of this device and a significant influence on Orwell.

George Carlin said, "Americans have trouble facing the truth. So they invent a kind of a soft language to protect themselves from it." When a euphemism is used, its purpose is to soften the impact of something shocking, crude, ugly, embarrassing, or something along those lines. Carlin's point is that this indirect language may spare us some discomfort, but at the cost of vividness and expressiveness.

Here are a few examples of "softening" the language:

- Banks don't have 'bad loans'; they have 'nonperforming assets.'
- Employers don't lay off employees; they 'downsize.'
- Teachers don't say a child has done poorly, but that he 'needs improvement.'
- Obituaries don't say 'died;' they say 'passed away.'

For me, one of the most shocking examples is this: Officials of NASA, Thiokol, and Rockwell International, in the aftermath of the Space Shuttle Challenger disaster, referred to the astronauts' bodies as "recovered components," and the astronauts' coffins as "crew transfer containers."

Linguist William Lutz identified the four most common types of doublespeak as

- euphemism
- jargon
- gobbledygook or "bureaucratese"
- inflated language

EUPHEMISMS are a type of doublespeak that attempt to make certain situations seem more palatable. They are used to soften a blow rather than to hide the truth. They're evasive, but not usually malicious.

- "a bit shaky" instead of "very poor quality"
- "ill-advised" instead of "a terrible idea"
- "person of interest" instead of a "suspect in a crime"
- "be put to sleep" instead of "euthanized"

JARGON can be described as terminology commonly used in a particular occupation, industry, or group.

- "collateral damage" instead of "multiple fatalities"
- "enhanced interrogation" instead of "torture"
- "ethnic cleansing" instead of "genocide"
- "negative cash flow" instead of "spending more than you make"
- "negative patient outcome" instead of "the patient died"

And the worst of all, which also partakes of gobbledygook:

- The US State Department appointing a consumer affairs coordinator to "review existing mechanisms of consumer input, thruput, and output, and seek ways of improving these linkages via the 'consumer communication channel.'"

GOBBLEDYGOOK involves speech that is so confusing as to be incomprehensible. It tends to include big words—many times used incorrectly—and long sentences that are difficult, if not impossible, to follow or understand.

- "Upon documentation of said patient's symptoms and conducting an examination of her otolaryngological region, the ultimate diagnosis is a case of viral rhinitis." instead of "The patient has a common cold."
- "The prognosticators seek to peer into the morrow for guidance regarding eventualities," instead of "They're making plans for the future."

INFLATED LANGUAGE is also called puffery, making things seem better than they are.

- "best meal ever" instead of "really good food"
- "new and improved" instead of "package redesign" or "changed an ingredient"
- "once in a lifetime opportunity" instead of "a great opportunity"
- "shabby chic" instead of "old and worn"

Let's have some fun with euphemisms, which are intended to make a bad situation look less offensive and a bit tolerable, or even hilarious. Most people use these phrases when they're trying to avoid taking a direct responsibility for an action.

- A little thin on top - Bald.
- Adult beverages - Hard drinks like beer and wine.
- Full and frank discussion - Drunk.
- Tired and over-emotional - Drunk.
- Adult content - Pornography.
- Horizontal gymnastics - Sex.
- Be shooting blanks - Sterile.
- Be economical with the truth - Tell a lie.
- Commit a terminological inexactitude - Tell a lie.
- Between jobs - Unemployed.
- Embarking on a journey of self-discovery - Unemployed.

- Big boned - Fat.
- Chronologically challenged - Late.
- Vertically challenged - Short.
- Financially challenged - Poor or broke.
- Temporary negative cash flow - Broke.
- Dirty needle - Mosquito.
- Hairy nope nope - Spider.
- Slithery tube dude - Snake.
- Trouser snake - Penis.
- Genuine imitation leather - 100% virgin vinyl.
- Pre-enjoyed vehicle - Used car.
- Over the hill and picking up speed - Old.

I've saved the best for last. As a committed writer and reader, I always read book blurbs. I know they don't tell the truth and I know they're bound to be exaggerated, but I can't help myself. I'm still optimistic enough to hope that maybe the blurb will tell me whether I'll find the book enjoyable. Now, here's a glossary of terms (I will eschew doublespeak and tell the truth; I stole it off the Web) which explains what those adjectives in blurbs really mean.

Enchanting — there's a dog in it
 Heart-warming — there's a dog and a child in it
 Inspirational — child and dog open a lemonade stand
 Moving — child dies
 Heart-rending — dog dies
 Thoughtful — mind-numbingly tedious
 Haunting — set in the past
 Exotic — set abroad
 Audacious — set in the future
 Award-winning — set in India
 Perceptive — set in north London
 Provocative — infuriating
 Epic — editor cowed by author's reputation
 From the pen of a master — same old same old
 In the tradition of —shamelessly derivative
 Spare and taut — under-researched
 Richly detailed — over-researched
 Disturbing —author bonkers
 Stellar — author young and photogenic
 Classic — author hanging in there
 Vintage — author past it

If you're being "lexiphanic," you're using ostentatiously pretentious words

and language.

The word comes from the title of a dialogue that was composed by the Greek writer Lucian in the first century CE. Lexiphanes, the title character of the satire, likes to use pretentious words and convoluted sentences, believing that it shows his intellect. Another character, Lycinus, says to him, "There is not a doubt I shall go raving mad under the intoxication of your exuberant verbosity."

As Benjamin Disraeli said about William Gladstone, "A sophisticated rhetorician, inebriated with the exuberance of his own verbosity." And I have a strong suspicion that Disraeli was echoing Lycinus.

Long, fancy (grandiloquent) words are fun to make up and fun to use. "Absquatulate," for example, means to leave in a hurry or to make off with something. "Callithumpian" means cacophonous, especially as a celebration or protest. "Bodacious" means admirable. "Obfuscate" means to make something hard to understand, especially deliberately.

Lexiphanes is also a genus of leaf beetles. One supposes that they chew on leaves, not dictionary pages.



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Books by Lea Tassie

Tour Into Danger

Cats in Clover
Siamese Summers
Cat Under Cover
Cats & Crayons
Calico Cat Caper

The Case of the Copycat Killer

Deception Bay
Deep Water
Dire Straits

Green Blood Rising
Red Blood Falling
Shockwave

A Clear Eye
Double Image
Eyes Like a Hawk

Harvest
Walking the Windsong
Connections

Two Shakes of a Lamb's Tail
Baa Baa Black Sheep, Have You Any Words?
The Wordy Ram

BOOKS EDITED BY LEA TASSIE

Charger the Soldier
Charger the Weapon
Charger the God
The Missing Year

About This Book

The title *The Wordy Ram* seemed to be a natural succession to my first two books about weird words, *Baa Baa, Black Sheep, Have You Any Words?* and *Two Shakes of a Lamb's Tail*. This book, like its predecessors, explores the source of common and uncommon phrases in our amazing, complex English language. The language goes on evolving, as new words become accepted and old ones fade away. I will most certainly run out of sheep before I run out of crazy or interesting words and phrases.

Do take the time to read this timely tome when you have a big enough stretch of time to have a whale of a time losing track of time, and thus become a legend in your own time. If you need time-out to deal with crunch time, then perhaps changing to daylight saving time will not only gain you time, but give you a good time as well. However, if it gives you the devil of a time, you may want to try reading double-time and avoid the ravages of time. If that doesn't work, try to hit the big time.

Remember, time spent with cats (or sheep) is never wasted.

Author Bio

Lea Tassie grew up on an isolated homestead in northern British Columbia. Now she lives and writes in the beautiful, temperate, Pacific Coast rainforest. Her fiction includes cat humor, science fiction, and mainstream novels. Her non-fiction deals in a light-hearted way with the weird words and phrases found in the English language.

